I CARRIED MY SORROW SONGS

The Expression of Dissent and Social Protest in

the Blues and Hip Hop

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INTRODUCTION

The topic for my master's thesis was decided upon a few years ago, and has not changed a lot from my initial ideas. It turned out that what I wanted to write about was closely related to the main arguments and discussions in the master seminar on *Popular Music in the United States As a Reflection of American Culture*. I have always found the history of music and the history behind music to be very interesting. Most music entails a lot of storytelling and rich subtext, whether it is expressed directly in the lyrics or in the more implicitly in the subtext. I have been interested in hip hop culture and music for many years and have always felt that the negative attention it has been given in the media and at times in academia, much due to its misogynist and violent lyrics, was just a part of the picture. The hip hop generation has always reflected the history of African Americans, not just what they themselves were going through, but the legacy of their black forefathers as well. The blues aesthetic, with its Faustian legends and raw lyrics, had a strong appeal to me and it seemed interesting to view it in perspective of history and the black community. I thought it would be fascinating to explore the connection between the blues and hip hop, in order to see if hip hop's social commentary might be seen as a continuation of a tradition in African American music, and if so, what this protest meant to African Americans.

ARGUMENT

The blues is an expression of the African American experience from slavery onwards but with a special attention to the 19th and 20th century. As the blues emerged, it was considered folk music, but as it reached the northern cities and gained fame, it was

transformed into popular music. In this thesis I will focus on the early stages of the country blues, when it emerged as a type of folk music in the American South. Hip hop originated in the northern ghettoes in the late 1970s, and it was an expression of gloom and desperation in these urban ghettoes. It soon developed into more than a musical genre, hip hop became a culture of its own. The golden age of hip hop, from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, will be the primary focus of my study of hip hop and the genre's lyrical material.

My main argument in this thesis is that African American music throughout history has been a way of conveying a message of black Americans' experience as a minority and as a discriminated people. It has been a way of communicating within the black community, as well as to the rest of the world, whoever is willing to listen. African American music has been seen as everything from storytelling and description of everyday life to a survival mechanism. I would claim that music was perhaps the primary outlet of expression in the African-American community during the era of the blues. And even though African-Americans have found more outlets to express their discontent in recent years, music is still an extremely important channel for young African-Americans to express their emotions and criticism of society.

There are many different genres within the field of African American music, and most of them contain subversive elements. I have chosen to focus primarily on two of the genres I find to be not only the most subversive, but which also seem to have a lot in common, namely blues and hip hop. Both blues and hip-hop are in different ways protest music, and they give a depiction of black life in two different time periods in American history. I will start out by giving a brief account of the history of African American music, to get some sense of its background and what role history has played in its evolution. The other genres of African-American music will

be mentioned briefly to bridge the time gap between blues and hip hop, but they will not be given any specific focus, as they are clearly not as relevant to my discussion.

In this thesis, I will primarily focus my attention on the music as an expression of dissent and as a voice of social protest, as well as on its more general subversive function. The subversiveness of black music is not always expressed through direct social protest, and I will discuss the nature of the two genres as protest music, whether it is explicit or more implicit. Protest music often has a clearly stated political message and goal, but I wanted to look at the music where the message and protest was more subtle. In relation to these questions I look at the circumstances that might explain partly why this is music in opposition. The contrast to and interaction with the dominant white community will obviously also figure importantly in my discussion, since that is usually what African-American music is in opposition to or protesting against. This theme will be automatically integrated in many of the subchapters.

Related to the discussion of the expression of discontent and dissent is the significance of this musical expression to the singer and his or her audience. The fact that the music is subversive, affects the singer and the community in several ways, as I will discuss throughout the thesis. I also wanted to take a look at what it means to the performers, their audience and the community, to have a music that it so close to their own lives. What kind of effect would it have? Protest music in a traditional sense has had more than the function of arousing political support and activism, as it in many cases has been thought to define and identify generations and subcultures, as with the protest music of the 1960s and the counterculture of that era. I wanted to see if that was the case with music that perhaps carried more of an implicit protest, or that was not just made for pure political purposes. With the blues I have dedicated a subchapter to this topic, while with hip hop it is integrated within several

of the subchapters.

Different styles of music and songs are an expression of the society they originated from, directly or indirectly. I believe music can never be completely isolated from the social, political, economic and cultural circumstances it is a part of. This will be very evident in my thesis, as I will devote some space to the socio-cultural and historical circumstances that gave birth to blues and hip-hop music. This will serve partly as an explanation of why the music has had such a subversive function.

Blues and especially hip hop are, like most music genres, dominated by men. The lyrics are a natural consequence of that, so the focus will automatically be on male performers and the messages they convey. However, African American women have also made a large musical contribution, so I will include the influence and legacy of some of the greatest women in black music, and I have devoted a chapter to the female blues singers to get a woman's perspective. The subject of women in hip hop is clearly more current and is also an interesting discussion, but I feel that the blues women were even more controversial and constituted a significant group in their time.

As for limitations, I will not give a lot of attention and time to the purely musicological part of the genres, such as instrumentation, structure, sampling, etc; as that would seem rather irrelevant to my argument. Nor will I pay much attention to the music industry and business. This thesis will focus on African American music as a cultural phenomenon and expression, especially of protest and dissent. My argument will be based on the assumption that the music is an expression of African Americans as a subjugated people. I have also wanted to look at the future of African American music as an expression of dissent and as something more than a purely musical expression. For that reason my last subchapter is about the future of hip hop and the

direction this music seems to be taking.

SOURCES, FORMAT AND APPROACH

Within the field of popular music there are a number of studies on the lyrics of protest. However, most of what I have come across has dealt with social protest in a direct sense, giving it a more narrow definition than what I have chosen for my own investigation. Furthermore, in much of the literature I found that the idea of protest in music was combined with other topics, especially when it came to African American music.

As for the blues, some of the literature is from the 1960s, because the cultural climate at the time was politically correct, and there was a raised consciousness around race and ethnicity. In the 1950s there was a folk music revival that expanded into the 1960s and sparked a new interest in the studies of blues. Furthermore, I have found that a lot was also written about the blues in the 1990s. I have tried to focus on writers well-known in their field of study. Paul Oliver has written numerous books on the blues and was recently celebrated by the *Popular Music and Society* journal for his contribution to the field. Oliver's book *Blues Fell This Morning* contains a great number of blues lyrics by well-known artists, but also lyrics by lesser-known artists that would have been difficult to find otherwise. In most blues songs the first line in each verse is repeated, in some of my sources the line was repeated and in other it simply said "twice" behind the first line. I have written the first line only once in my quoted lyrics, in order to save space. As for hip hop, Tricia Rose and Nelson George provided a lot of background information on the hip hop generation and its culture. Both writers have contributed greatly to the exploration of hip hop as a cultural phenomenon, and they both have first hand knowledge of these communities.

I have adopted an interdisciplinary approach, as I study social, historical and cultural implications in relation to the creation of the music. Historical circumstances in particular will be important in giving a background to the music, as these circumstances may also serve partly as an explanation to the development, content and meaning of the music. Some of the books I have used dealing with the blues and its meaning, also explore these historical and social circumstances that helped shape the blues. With hip hop it was much the same, but the lyrics are also much more explicit and direct so a lot of the historical and cultural circumstances are described in the lyrics.

As for method, I have relied mostly on textual analysis. My primary sources are song lyrics. Many of my observations are based on the lyrics I have studied directly related to this thesis. But some of my argument, viewpoints and assumptions are also based on lyrics and music I was familiar with before I started researching this paper. Having listened to hip hop for many years, I considered myself to have a fairly good idea of the message of the music and lyrics. I had previously studied blues lyrics, but the thesis demanded further exploration. This is also partly the reason I chose to focus on hip hop and blues, because these two genres have a wide range of lyrical material directly or indirectly linked to social protest. The lyrics will be italicized and set apart from the rest of the text. Quotes from my secondary sources will be included in the text.

Because my thesis is about two major genres of popular music, I chose to divide the thesis into two main chapters, one on blues and one on hip hop. Furthermore, I have divided these two chapters into five subchapters. The subchapters are of varying lengths because I found it necessary to separate some of the topics from the rest of the material, this goes in particular for the subchapters discussing social

protest in the different genres. This is basically not a comparative thesis as I will not use a lot of space to compare and parallel blues and hip hop. Both the different time periods and the limited scope of a master's thesis have made this a natural choice. However, some comparison is inevitable as I attempt to show how African American music has developed, in the realm of social protest. I will get back to this in my conclusion.

CHAPTER I. THE BLUES

I want to start this chapter with a brief account of the forms of music that the blues emerged from, thus providing a point of departure for understanding the music. As this chapter is called The Blues, and that is quite a comprehensive concept, I have chosen to divide this chapter into five different subchapters, all of them covering different aspects of the blues, relevant to the focus of my thesis.

ORIGINS OF THE BLUES

The blues is perhaps the first major form of music to emerge from the African American experience, as the slaves struggled to recreate their lives in America. Other genres of African American music, like jazz and soul, owe a lot to the blues, because for the first time, black musicians (and black people) had a voice of their own. The blues may therefore be seen as fundamentally important for all forms of African American music.

The difference between European music and African American music emphasizes the stereotypical characteristics of ethnicities. At a UNESCO conference on musical pedagogy in 1972, Swedish psychologist Bertil Sundin gave a lecture about the differences between the European, white music tradition and the African American music tradition. Sundin lists several dichotomies when it comes to European and African American music, such as order vs. spontaneity and improvisation, intellectual reaction vs. emotional reaction, emotional withdrawal vs. direct emotional expression, meaning built into the music vs. feelings brought on by

music. All of these are relevant points for most genres of African American music. At the same time, all these characteristics of African American music tend to reinforce the picture white Americans had of black people at the time the blues emerged. In their minds, black people were seen as less constrained and thus less "civilized". Sundin traces the characteristics of African American music to its background in the lower socio-economic classes of American society, a class that had no political representation, no voice, other than its music.

So I will briefly describe what African American music was like before the emergence of the blues, what it meant to black people, and how these different elements blended into what was to become the blues. From the early days of colonial America and the beginning of the institution of slavery, black and white culture were worlds apart. Pierro Scaruffo in his account of the history of the blues,[1] observes that white European "classical" music with its emphasis on melody and instrumentation, was a counterpoint of the African rhythm-based folk music. America is the first place where European and African music coexist and blend. Many of the traits associated with the blues came with the slaves from West Africa, but this is for the most part connected to the more technical traits of the music, such as musical and instrumental techniques.

As for location, the blues originated in the American South, and it is a common perception that it was born in the Mississippi Delta. The Delta certainly fostered some of the greatest blues musicians, and some of the earliest blues music on records. It is debated, however, if the Delta is the only birthplace of the blues. Blues scholar David Evans claims the Delta is one of the places blues originated from, but

[1] http://www.scaruffi.com/history/blues.html.

not the only one.[2] Texas and Memphis were also important centers in the development of the blues, alongside New Orleans and Kansas City, and they also fostered many of the most important blues musicians. Later this would be known as rural blues, the other major sub-genre being urban blues, which mainly originated in Chicago. It is hard to state an exact time for the birth of blues, because the blues owes many of its traits to existing styles of African-American music. However, by the 1890s music characterized as blues was performed around the American South. It is also contested which song was the first recorded blues song, but by the early 1900s blues songs were being recorded in the south.

However, before that, black music was many different things. According to Scaruffo, African music took on three different shapes in its meeting with American culture and society, influenced by religion, work and amusement. Colonial America needed a justification for their slave trade, and religion became the answer. The slave trade was then seen as a way of saving the lost souls of the Africans from their primitive and pagan lifestyle, introducing them to the one true religion, namely Christianity. When the West-African folk songs met the American religious music, the Negro spiritual was born. I think the spirituals were important in the development of black music, because it was there that African Americans were made familiar with their stigma as an inferior people. The music they were accustomed to, and the music that was their natural expression, was adapted to Christian hymns, creating the Negro spiritual. Black people experienced that their ways were never to be the norm, white was the norm, in music as well as in life in general. Their music, like themselves, was uncultivated, representing the voice and sound of savages. Colonial America saw the slaves as less than human because they were not Christians, because of their primitive

[2] http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam/evans.html. Accessed 12.08.2006

African past, but not even converting to Christianity could not significantly change their status.

Spirituals were sung mostly outside church and service and incorporated elements from their own lives as well as praising Jesus and re-telling the story of the Old Testament. The spirituals had a more positive outlook on life than the work songs. They often sang about the "promised land" and what freedom would be like. This interaction with a new religion gave them hope of something better to come in their future, if only beyond the grave. It is a paradox that the blues owes some of its stylistic traits to the spirituals. As the blues genre evolved and became independent, it became the antithesis of anything that had do with the church. Many of the subjects covered by blues musicians are non-religious, as I will get back to in a later chapter. However, spirituals and the emerging gospel music is still an important legacy of early black life in America, and thus of the development of the blues.

Another form of black music that emerged with slavery was the work songs. The work songs originated in the field hollers or the field calls. This way of singing also worked as communication, and it carried a tradition of a call and response pattern. Paul Oliver traces the work songs back to the late nineteenth century in his search for the origins of the blues[3]. It started out in the cotton or tobacco fields in the south during slavery, but the tradition was still going strong after the abolition of slavery. The slaves brought to America were scattered all over the South, and one way of communicating with other slaves from other plantations out in the field, were the field hollers. They were often personalized so that you could recognize the "singer" from his own style of hollering. Often when one slave started a field call, another would respond, and this tradition continued as the field holler developed into the

[3] See *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed, 1990), 5.

tradition of work songs. A subject of many of the work songs was the conditions of their work life. Although words like racism and discrimination were seldom used in the lyrics that have been preserved, they were pervasively present in black lives. The songs described their daily lives, working from sunrise to sunset. The work songs were repetitive and synchronized with the physical movement of the workers. It was a way of strengthening the bond between the workers, and it reinforced the group spirit. The call and response pattern often worked out in such a way that the leader of the group would call out one line, and the group of workers would call out a response. This tradition can be easily recognized in the blues, where the singer will ask a question, and then answers it. Earlier in this chapter I mentioned three types of early African American musical expression, the third one being amusement. They were usually more upbeat songs intended for plantation parties among the slaves, and it was music intended for dancing. Like the work songs, this was a musical expression closely linked to their African heritage and tradition. Thus, slaves used music as much for recreational purposes as fro religious ones.

Black music in the pre-blues era was not only songs of subtle subversive messages. During the anti-slavery movement, free blacks sang songs of liberation and the hope of freedom. These songs were an important part of the anti-slavery meetings, and singing was something everyone could do and everyone could relate to. They used tunes everyone knew, and added their own words to them. Another way music was important, if not indispensable, during the anti-slavery movement, was in relation to the Underground Railroad. Some songs were designed for encouragement, joy and hope for the future, before the actual trip was made. On other occasions, music and songs had a more direct purpose linked to the actual escape. Eileen Southern writes that when a “conductor” was on the way to help them escape to the north, it was often

announced in a song[4]. Some would even contain direct details of the escape. Some of the different elements and styles of the music that gave birth to the blues contained subversive elements. Others were depictions of their daily lives. Both these traits would come to be characteristic of blues music.

BLUES AS PROTEST MUSIC

A clear definition of the exact cultural meaning and value of blues music is necessary before discussing it in detail. A common definition of protest music would be that it is music that objects to injustice, whether it is based on social, economic, political or racial circumstances. The singer aims at educating and engaging people to take action. Protest songs usually contain elements of subversion and controversy. They are traditionally considered to be folk music, or belong to folk music genres. Protest music is usually seen as a part of a larger and organized protest. However, I believe this definition can prove to be somewhat constrictive, which I will get back to. As for the derivation and meaning of the word *blues*, it has been debated, but there seems to be more or less a consensus about the origin of the word. Robert Springer relies on the Oxford English Dictionary definition where the word refers to the "blue devils", which in turn meant depression and "having the blues".[5]

It is debatable whether or not blues can be considered protest music, since the time when blues emerged was not a time in history where African Americans could speak their mind. At this point in time, they were not in a position to express any form of organized protest aiming to improve their own situation. Most would say that the number of blues songs concerned with direct protest of any kind, is small. Even if the

[4]See *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 3rd ed,

blues singers had had the opportunity and social space to be more specific in their protest, most blues singers were so far removed from real-life politics and the ruling government of the country that they would not have the terminology and tools to address actual politics. There are examples of more direct politically conscious blues in the 20th century, but at the point in time when blues emerged and was popularized, there is little evidence of blues as a conscious social and political protest, if one defines protest music in a narrow sense.

However, many elements of the blues can be seen as subversive, and even as an implicit or indirect protest against the conditions they were living under. Other elements can be seen as subversive simply because they were a part of the everyday life and experience in the black community. It is part of my argument that the blues became an expression of race and the experience of being black, and in a country where being white is the norm, this expression is subversive in itself. As Mary Ellison has observed, "The coupling of black music with protest is a natural alliance. Since the first songs by black people were heard in Africa, black music has expressed resistance to oppression."[6] Considering the origins of the blues, I would say that the most fundamental aspect of the blues is that the music and the lyrics are a real and direct depiction of the everyday life and struggle among African-Americans. The blues singers did not sugar-coat anything. At the same time as it is direct in its words, it is often subtle in its protest. It is not explicit and confrontational as for example hip-hop. But the lyrics in themselves are usually quite direct; the blues singers usually say what is on their mind.

Writer and scholar David Evans claims that the element of social protest in

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1997),144.
[5] See *Authentic Blues-Its History and Its Themes* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 28.
[6] See *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praegers Publishers, 1989), 1.

blues music is one of the many popular myths that has emerged with the growing popularity of blues since the 1960s: "Personal dissatisfaction with all sorts of situations can be found in abundance, but blues rarely serves as an expression of collective solidarity or aims at changing the system."[7] The blues probably never served as a conscious expression of a collective identity with the intention of being a forum in which black people could express their grievances and expected to be heard. It is important to take into consideration the environment that the blues came out of and was born into. Black people were not in any way allowed to express their opinions freely during slavery. And after the Civil War, although they were free and emancipated in theory, this did not necessarily mean freedom of speech. My impression of blues men and their lyrics is that they often meant it more as an outlet for their emotions and as an expression of their personal experiences, something the community related to. William Danaher and Stephen Blackwelder suggest that the bluesmen question the condition of black people's lives, "these lyrics are problematizations of social experiences of a subordinated group. The lost job, the cruel landlord, the unfaithful lover: these songs question why societal relations must be as they are."[8] Considering the history of African Americans in the United States, it was not likely that anyone outside the black community would take what they had to say seriously, or maybe even get to hear what they had to say. Then again, a protest song does not necessarily need to be heard by the oppressor. It is enough that the audience or singer recognizes the message and value of it. The blues musicians thus did not see themselves as representing a community in opposition or as a part of a collective organized protest. However, I believe that blues, unintentionally and indirectly, was adopted by many in the community as an expression they could relate

[7] http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/isam/evans.html. Accessed 12.08.2006
[8] See "The Emergence of Blues and Rap: A Comparison and Assessment of the Context, Meaning and

to. Mary Ellison explains it this way;

> "When songs are sung about oppression, whether it is
> channeled trough racism, poverty, or brutality, they are
> elementally dangerous because they are exposing the reality
> of situations that those in power would prefer to be masked.
> Songs that strip away illusions and show things as they are,
> are subversive simply because they tell the truth.
> In societies structured around discrimination,
> nothing is more subversive than the truth."[9]

The implicit protest against the conditions African Americans were living under is clearly present in many of the songs, intentional or not. I think the expression of their experience as a marginalized people inevitably becomes a sort of protest, as the discontent will always be present in their music when they are truthful. Considering the social and cultural environment of that time, an expression of discontent with their situation is inevitably subversive and controversial.

BLUES AS A REFLECTION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In this subchapter I will discuss how the blues is a depiction of everyday-life. My argument is that the musical expression discloses the thoughts and behaviour of a marginalized group. Most of the themes in blues are a direct outcome of the historical and social circumstances the blues singers were forced to live with, it reflects their reality. Although not a direct outcome of slavery, I will try to illustrate how the blues is inevitably linked to slavery and the repercussions of this enslavement, as well as the impending emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century. LeRoi Jones claims that blues equals poetry in its social reference, and that blues is essentially about social

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Message" from *Popular Music and Society* (Winter, 1993), 6.
[9] Mary Ellison, 40.

phenomena that cannot really be extracted from what the blues is about.[10]

Work and the conditions of work became a major source of inspiration to many blues musicians. Although the Emancipation Declaration meant that they were now theoretically free, the reality was quite different. After emancipation in the South, slavery was replaced by other institutionalized work conditions, low-paid, low-skilled work such as sharecropping and tenant farming, which in reality was no less cruel or exploitative than slavery. Black people usually ended up in debt in systems like sharecropping and tenant-farming, so in the end they were more or less enslaved by this system as well. Other work opportunities that blacks had included working on the railroads, in the levees, in the logging-camps, turpentine-camps, all low-grade and dangerous work that did not leave them with much more freedom or autonomy than actual slavery. Whatever job they took, they still had to rely on the goodwill of the white man, the boss, to make ends meet. Work is a common topic in many blues songs, and subject to much grief:

> *Well I drink to keep from worrying and laugh to keep from crying,*
> *I keep a smile on my face so the public won't know my mind.*
>
> *Some people think I'm happy but they sure don't know my mind,*
> *They see this smile on my face, but my heart is bleeding all the time*[11]

Here it is obvious that the singer Jimmy Gordon tries to ease his worries and pain, and he has to keep up a happy face for his boss. He also sings of how he molds himself into the stereotype of the black man as a childlike buffoon character, who is intellectually inferior in his behavior, so that he will not reveal what he is really feeling. The reason that many of the songs are about work, I believe, is that work for black people is a constant source of inferiority, as opposed to a source of autonomy

[10] See *Blues People: Negro Music in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: Morrow Quills Paperbacks, 1963), 50.
[11] Paul Oliver, 20.

and self-realization. It manifested more than anything that they lacked control over their own lives and were far from free agents.

LeRoi Jones talks about the decentralization of the black population as one of the most important results of the emancipation. After they were emancipated a lot of blacks went north and others traveled within the south looking for work or trying to escape discrimination, which meant that African Americans were a lot more scattered than before. This meant uprooting and all the implications that brought on. Blacks were used to living in the slave quarters that were tight-knit communities, and this uprooting left many of them lonely and disheartened. This might be illustrated by one of the most common subjects in blues lyrics, the railroad. In some cases the railroad symbolized a new beginning, but in many cases it symbolized uprooting from your community and leaving home and everything familiar. The feeling of being uprooted and displaced can be seen as related to the individuality that characterizes blues. And this in turn leads to a more personalized type of music and lyrics, as I will discuss in another chapter. The scattering and migration of black people, more than anything, helped spread and develop the blues.

The disappointment most African Americans felt after it became evident that the Emancipation did not leave them much better off than before, quickly turned into disillusion. They were disheartened about their situation and their lives. Their world still contained few opportunities, and thus they had little hope for the future.

Now I started at the bottom, and I stayed right there,
Don't seem like I'm gonna get nowhere.

Now I'm gonna take it easy, I'm gonna take it easy,
I'm gonna take it easy, babe, that's what I'm gonna do.

You can have a old job, maybe it's hard or soft,
You try to save something and they lay you off,

Now what your bosses are doing you can never tell,
They's always trying to cut the personnel,

I've got myself together, made my mind up now,
I won't have a doggone thing nohow.[12]

In this song, Gabriel Brown demonstrates how disenchanted he is about his life and how he has more or less given up. The singer tells of how he started at the bottom, and has no hope of ever getting anywhere. Emancipation signified the hope of upward social mobility and possibilities for the future. Hopes were high for many blacks at that point, and the higher the hopes, the deeper the fall. Many had a hard time reconciling themselves to the disillusion they felt. LeRoi Jones observes that the Redemption of the South, in which white southerners reversed the progress made in the Reconstruction Era, undid the little sense of freedom and equality black people had felt. It was a successful attempt to prevent black people from having any legal rights and representation, and the most infamous consequence of this was imposed segregation, the Jim Crow Laws. Furthermore, Jones points out that after Emancipation, blacks had no place in American society, as opposed to during slavery where blacks served a highly visible function. Jones interprets the Redemption of the South as the attempt to dehumanize African Americans, to once again make them intellectually inferior and morally degenerate. This is a theme reflected in many blues lyrics. In "I Wonder When I Get To Be Called A Man", Big Bill Broonzy sings about not being accepted as a man as he is fighting a war, working on levee camps, getting an education, and still [*b*]*lack man's a boy, don't care what he can do*[13]. Big Bill Broonzy, as well as Gabriel Brown, seems beaten down, weary and disenchanted. As I suggested earlier, in these kinds of expressions and sentiments the singers are questioning the conditions under which blacks are forced to live, and thus they are at

least implicitly oppositional.

Sex, relationships and family are also subjects treated in many blues songs. These are themes that are not necessarily seen as an expression of dissent but they can still be considered as controversial because of their frankness and honesty about life in the black community. At the bottom of all blues song are raw emotions. Although a different world, the romanticism of the antebellum era was not completely forgotten, and whites were still not used to such uninhibited display of emotions.

A well-known legacy of slavery is the rupture of family life. In the eyes of their white owners, the way the slaves were living their lives was immoral and hedonistic. During slavery, the black community was a matriarchy, the importance of the father/man was diminished, and this did not immediately change after emancipation. Women were more equal and independent in the black community, and can often be seen as the backbone of the family. In the South, where the patriarchal tradition was strong, this was very controversial:

> *What a sad old Sunday, people, this year in May,*
> *I think of my Mother and I kneel down to pray.*
>
> *Mother was a woman sure to me, I really do know,*
> *I'll never have a friend like my dear old mother no more*[14]

This song by St. Louis Jimmy testifies to the strong position of women in the black community, which again reflects the weakened position of the black man, as a consequence of the legacy of slavery.

Many blues scholars agree that the widely covered topic of the relationship between black men and women may be seen as a metaphor for black and white people, respectively, and that the black couple's tension is really a metaphor for racial

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[12] Paul Oliver, 19.
[13] http://www.geocities.com/bourbonstreet/delta/2541/blbbroon.htm#i.

tension. In that sense, the black woman that the bluesman takes his frustration out on is really a symbolic representation of the white man. Robert Springer has done a study on the frequency of themes in the Delta Blues. His corpus in the study is 102 songs, in which women's infidelity is the most frequent theme and occurs in 32 of the songs.[15] According to Springer, the frequent occurrence of women's infidelity in blues songs symbolizes the black man's mistrust of white man and society. Their disappointment with the newly established segregation and Jim Crow laws is perhaps at the bottom of these songs. Paul Oliver has suggested that Robert Johnson's "Stones in My Passway" could be a metaphor for his disappointment with society:

> *I got stones in my passway and my road seems dark at night*
> *I have pains in my heart, they have taken my appetite.*
>
> *I have a bird to whistle, and I have a bird to sing,*
> *I've got a woman that I'm lovin', boy ,but she don't mean a thing.*[16]

So as they sing of ruptured family life and deceit, they are in reality making a disguised social commentary, in many cases. Furthermore, Springer claims that it is important to keep in mind the potential of symbolism in all topics that are taboo, which I take to mean that he sees the potential of a cultural and social function in controversial lyrics, mainly an oppositional function. When it comes to man and woman relationships, unrequited love and the loss of a lover is also a common topic in the blues. Richard Middleton, in his essay *O Brother, let's go down home: loss, nostalgia and the blues,*[17] asserts the importance of loss in the blues and suggests that the loss of a lover really means loss in a broader sense. He believes loss of a lover can symbolize the feeling of being rootless and estranged in the modern world and life

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[14] Paul Oliver, 49.
[15] Robert Springer, 72.
[16] Paul Oliver, 93.
[17] See Richard Middleton." O Brother, let's go down home: loss, nostalgia and the blues" *Popular*

they all of a sudden had to adjust to. Although the loss of a lover might not be viewed as a controversial subject, this too can be regarded as a metaphor for something beyond its literal meaning, thus becoming oppositional and more controversial.

The thinly disguised metaphors regarding sexual encounters are probably the most controversial aspect of the blues. As mentioned earlier, black people were the victim of many stereotypes, sexual promiscuity and loose morals being one of the most common ones. Whites often found confirmation of their suspicions regarding black people's promiscuous behavior in blues lyrics. Paul Oliver notes that the shocking sincerity of the blues was the main reason that whites rejected it as indecent instead of accepting it as an authentic form of expression, and suspected it of hiding even greater sins than what was directly expressed. In the process, whites ignored any responsibility for the encouragement of promiscuity in the black community, which is easily traced back to slavery. Oliver furthermore claims that blues cannot be measured by the conventions and standards of popular music, because of its directness. Blind Boy Fuller confirms his sexual power in this song:

> *I got a big fat woman, grease shakin' on her bone*
> *I say, hey, hey, meat shakin' on her bone,*
> *An' every time she shakes some man done left his home.*
>
> *If when you boys see my woman you can't keep her long,*
> *I say hey, hey, you can't keep her long,*
> *I got a new way to keep her down, you "monkey men" can't catch on*[18]

Sexual assertiveness in the blues can perhaps be seen as a source of strength in the African American community. Sexuality is one of the most frequently covered themes in the blues, and many of the singers appear to pride themselves on their sexual performance and power. This might possibly be seen in connection with the many sexual relationships, voluntary or not, between white men and black women

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during the days of slavery. Stating and emphasizing their sexual superiority is possibly a way for African American men to claim and validate themselves and their sexuality. Sexually explicit content in blues lyrics can therefore be seen as oppositional in its candor. Oliver confirms this by arguing that the explicit content and sexual boasting in blues songs have been viewed as a kind of protest, with the intention to shock the listeners and thus empower the singer. Many blues scholars have observed that sexuality in the blues can be seen as a metaphor for freedom, since this was the first time blacks had the freedom to choose in the matter of sexual partners and partners in general. I will get back to this in a different chapter. Typical of most subjects in the blues is that it ruptures the boundaries between the public and the private, and in white society no subject was more private than sexuality. So the outspokenness about sexuality was shocking enough, but the explicitness on the subject calls further attention to it. The extensive use of metaphors in blues testifies to the fact that the content of their lyrics was very controversial, one way or another.

Animalistic references in the blues are symptomatic of the treatment black people received, as well as suggesting the permanent scars of slavery and racial characteristics on their psyche. In many blues songs the singer refers to himself in the metaphor of an animal. The animalistic references go back to the days of slavery, where blacks were seen more or less as animals, intellectually and sexually. Blues singers often applied these animal comparisons to themselves in their lyrics. Champion Jack Dupree used a very common metaphor of the big bad wolf, [*w*]*hen you hear this wolf howling, howling at every woman I see*[19]. Other animals often used were rattlesnakes, ground-hogs and monkeys. This use of animalistic metaphors testifies to African Americans' forced acceptance of their treatment in America, and

[18] Paul Oliver, 103.
[19] Paul Oliver, 104.

even the implementation of this jargon themselves, and the implications it carries. In that sense it could be part of what Jones calls a "slave mentality", which he refers to as the "socially unfortunate psychic adjustments the slave had made during two hundred years of slavery."[20] However, many scholars subscribe to the viewpoint that these metaphors could also function as a source of strength to blacks. In many of the songs the singer does seem to take pride in equaling himself to an animal in that they claim to have the more or less admirable qualities of that animal, whether they are as strong and brawny as a hog, or as quick and slick as a rattle-snake. I do imagine however, that the sentiment of inferiority would still be present, if not explicitly expressed in the song.

A common denominator in this chapter is the feeling of being inferior; something African Americans had to deal with in all spheres of life. From the moment they were put on the slave-ships to America, they were treated as animals, and taught that they were subhuman and contemptible. This was deeply etched into their minds, and that is perhaps one of the cruelest legacies of slavery. This also becomes evident if one takes into consideration the colour based caste system the black community embraced themselves. The system is based on the assumption that black is equaled with evil, and lighter skin was thus more esteemed. Several theorists and scholars in the field of race studies have been concerned with what has been deemed the "public and psychological wages of whiteness", a concept first introduced by W.E.B. Dubois in his book *Black Reconstruction in America*. The theory suggests that in addition to the economic wages of being white, there are also social and psychological wages. If you are black it does not really matter if you are educated and have money, you will never escape the stigma of being black. If you are white, it does not matter so much if

[20] LeRoi Jones, 57.

you have money or education either, you will always have public and psychological advantages and privileges due to the fact that you are white. This inevitably affects the psyche of black people, who will always lose out. Tony Russell asserts in *Yonder Come the Blues* that "racial consciousness underlies even the most explicitly personal blues; the peculiar savour of the music rises from something more than individual emotion about love affairs and hunger and joblessness and solitude."[21] I take this to mean that to African Americans there is a fundamental realization and constant awareness of being an inferior people.

As Jones observed, the blues was a music that developed because of this position of the African Americans in America. Blues singer Edwin Buster Pickens explains the relationship between the music and real life this way:

> "[t]he only way anyone can ever play the blues-
> he's got to have them. You got to have experienced
> somethin' in life. You been troubled, you been broke,
> hungry, no job, no money, the one you love is deserted you-
> that makes you blue. Blues don't derive from a person's
> makin' up his mind: 'I'm gonna sing the blues.'
> He's got to have a feelin', he's got to have sometin'
> within, so he can bring it *out*. Just how he feels about it.
> Blues ain't nothin' but a good man feelin' bad-
> that's all they say it is. But he's feelin' bad over *somethin'*.
> No man in good spirit, no man in good heart can sing the blues,
> neither play them. There never has been, never will be.
> But nach'al blues come directly from a person's heart:
> what's he's experienced in life, what he's been through.
> Whether he's been troubled, whether he's ridden freight trains,
> where he's been put in jail; been beaten up by railroad dicks and
> everythin' else you understand-pushed around in life.
> That makes you blue. You have a tough way in life-that makes you
> blue. That's when you start to sing the blues-
> when you've got the blues."[22]

[21] Paul Oliver, Tony Russell, Robert M.W. Dixon, John Godrich and Howard Rye. *Yonder Come the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 202.
[22] Paul Oliver, *Conversation with the Blues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 2nd ed), 183.

THE DEVIL'S MUSIC: BLUES AND RELIGION

In my opinion, one of the most important reasons that blues was considered so controversial, is its secular nature. It became the antithesis of religious music, chiefly because of its coarse language, its unconventional themes and because of its rumored alliance with the devil. The blues' alleged alliance with the devil is perhaps the most infamous myth concerning the blues. Further examination of this myth is important because it signifies how the music and the performers were viewed by the public, as well as saying something about black life in general. The myth derives from the legend of Robert Johnson who supposedly met the devil at the crossroads somewhere in Mississippi and sold him his soul in exchange for becoming the legendary guitar player he is now known as. Other blues singers have also claimed an alliance with the devil, including Tommy Johnson and Peetie Wheatstraw. According to Gayle Dean Wardlow,[23] the concept of selling your soul to the devil is rooted in both white and black folklore and can be dated back to folktales in the 1700s, making the devil at the crossroads more or less synonymous with blues singers.

First and foremost this myth requires an exploration of the concept of the devil and religion, and what they entail. When the slaves came to America, they brought with them their African culture and religion, which was soon merged with the white cultural tradition and religion. In terms of music, the religious practice of white southerners was dominated by songs based on the Bible. With the emergence of the blues came the distinction between religious and secular music, both of them rooted in the same culture and history. As the spirituals had symbolized hope during slavery,

[23] See *Chasin' That Devil Music: Searching for the Blues* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 1998), 196.

emancipation brought a different reality and disappointment, and the blues offered a more truthful representation. The blues told of freedom as a reachable and more immediate virtue, as opposed to something to attain in the afterlife. To some, this pragmatic depiction of current reality in opposition to the sacred afterlife represented the rejection of religion. But many also believed that blues incorporated sacred elements and therefore threatened religious values due to its other controversial content, thus it was considered the devil's music.

In looking at representations of the devil in blues music, it is also interesting to look at the culture and belief system the slaves brought with them from West-Africa. The Yoruba culture, from which many of the slaves originated, was more or less maintained among the early slaves in America, and the mythology of the culture was present in their lives. Blues scholars more or less agree that the devil as the reincarnation of evil and the opposite of God is not always necessarily what is referred to as the devil in the black community or the blues. In the Yoruba mythology there is a trickster god, Eshu, also known as Legba (the voodoo version) or Eleggua (the Santeria version).Eshu is the protector of crossroads and doors, and he is also considered to represent sexuality as well as death. He can be both good and evil at the same time, and plays tricks on people in order for them to mature. "[e]shu's emphasis on trickery and vengeance made him an ideal Trisha for slaves, who imagined him as the saint of revenge against the whites. Under these conditions, his more malevolent aspects were emphasized, as his various aspects were multiplied to cover a range of nasty magical acts."[24]

In a hovedfag thesis, Gahr Frithjof Smith-Gahrsen[25] has suggested several indications of the presence of Eshu in the blues, and the possibility that he could be

[24] http://www.carnaval.com/sf00/trickster.htm. 02.28.2007
[25] See *The Devil's Music: Religion, Evil and Vice in the Blues.* Hovedfag thesis, University of Bergen,

the devil referred to in the blues. He is the one guarding the crossroads, where blues musicians are said to have met the devil, and entrances which can be interpreted as the entrance into a world of musical brilliance. Smith-Gahrsen also suggests in his thesis that Eshu *is* blues, as he has the potential to be good and evil at the same time, a quality the blues can be said to attain. The blues can be the outlet and expression of solitude and misery, at the same time it can also bring a sense of community as well as entertain an audience. Furthermore, the argument of the presence of Eshu and Yoruba in blues is supported by the references to voodoo in the blues. This would appear to be very controversial to white people and their religion, as voodoo claims humans can manipulate the natural forces of good and evil, not granting all power to God. Considering the complex and comprehensive religious belief of African Americans, it is difficult to make assumptions as to what the devil represents and means to a vast number of blues singers. Still, there is a possibility that the devil that appears in the blues represents other aspects than just being the reincarnation of evil as in the Christian tradition.

The more indirect association with the devil in the blues is perhaps best represented by the presence of sexuality, as the devil is seen as representing sin, which is inevitably linked to sexuality in Christianity. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the blues became the anti-thesis of the traditional African American gospel music and spirituals, and was viewed as hedonistic by religious blacks, as well as by the general white population. There is a close relationship between religious and sexual ecstasy as many attempted to channel sexual desires into religious passion, but in blues the latter more or less replaced the first. The sexual explicitness and boasting of sexual performance were not well received by white society. Although usually

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spoken of in metaphorical terms, it was clear that the blues was sexual in its nature and content. Animalistic metaphors occur frequently in the blues, and a common image in songs with sexual contents was the black snake, a well-known metaphor for the penis. In his thesis Smith-Gahrsen links the snake imagery in the blues to the snake in the Garden of Eden, who embodied Satan and epitomized evil.[26]

As previously mentioned, sexuality can be seen as representing freedom to blacks, and considering that white slave owners used religion to justify slavery, they may also have linked the explicit sexual content of blues lyrics to the newly acquired freedom of blacks, and that connection demonized sexuality further. Angela Davis explains it this way: "[i]n this sense, the incorporation by the black church of traditionally Christian dualism, which defines spirit as 'good' and body as 'evil', denied black people the opportunity to acknowledge one of their most significant social victories."[27] The blues thus became not just the anti-thesis to the white religious establishment, but they were also rejected by the black church.

In addition to being explicit about sexuality in general, the blues is also very straightforward when it comes to more specific sexual matters. The theme of marriage is seldom mentioned in the blues; however, the themes of love and partners appear frequently, as many blacks lived in common-law marriages and other living arrangements with their partners. It seems reasonable to assume that premarital sex was common among working-class blacks. And one can detect such relatively sexual boundaries in the black community in the blues. Adultery is another common theme in the blues. Many a song is about the "backdoor woman" or the "backdoor man", most famous is Willie Dixon's "Back Door Man", performed by Howlin Wolf:

I am a back door man

[26] Smith-Gahrsen, 48.
[27] See *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 131.

I am a back door man
Well the men don't know, but the little girls understand[28]

As mentioned, the sexual as well as the social boundaries were not immediately re-established after emancipation, and as a result infidelity became if not necessarily more frequent, at least more openly talked about and depicted in the black community. A great many blues songs are about the rejection or deceit of a lover. There is also the occasional song with the point of view of the "back-door man", as a recurrent theme in blues is sexual boasting, and so the singer prides himself on being a "ladies man", even when the lady is not his to begin with. The singers are rarely concerned with the repercussions and implications of adultery, it seems, and religious and moral codes are not an issue.

Homosexuality is another theme covered in the blues. Although to some extent accepted in the black community, homosexuality was not understood and homosexuals were spoken of in derogatory terms. There are many blues songs that describe homosexuals as deviants, women as well as men, but just the fact that they are mentioned and recognized in the black community would be seen as demoralizing in the eyes of the good Christians. In many of the songs concerning homosexuals they are portrayed as home wreckers, and the cause of much misery on behalf of the deceived husband or wife. Ma Rainey is one of them:

My man got a sissy, his name is "Miss Kate"
He shook that thing like jelly on a plate

Now all the people ask me why I'm all alone,
A sissy shook that thing and took my man from home[29]

However, due to the blues being an outlet for all kinds of emotions, some singers

[28] http://www3.clearlight.com/~acsa/introjs.htm?/~acsa/songfile/BACKDOOR.HTM
[29] Paul Oliver, 100.

would use the blues to express their sexual orientation and the troubles that came with it. George Hanna sang the following:

> *She call me a freakish man- What more was there to do*
> *Just 'cause she said I was strange that did not make it true*[30]

Needless to say, such direct references to homosexuality were condemned by the religious community. To white people, the appearance of homosexuality and sexuality in general in the blues only served to validate and reinforce the view they had of blacks as sexually perverted and hedonistic.

The blues aesthetic embraces most things that Christianity considers evil and vicious, sexuality is but one of them, but they seem to be intertwined, at least to its white critics. Due to the poverty that marked the black community, many blacks were involved in gambling. Lack of opportunity to make money as well as lack of intellectual stimulation popularized a number of games. Not only was gambling in itself illegal and considered immoral by the white churchgoers, but the players put their trust in superstitious beliefs to help them win money. Gambling usually took place in juke joints, alongside music, dancing and drinking, all of which was done somewhat differently than in white society. Because of the lives they were leading and the treatment they were subjected to, alcohol became an integral part of black life. Alcohol in the black community during the prohibition era usually meant "moonshine" from bootleggers who were not too concerned with sanitation. Many blues songs tell of the dangers and misery caused by bootlegged liquor and alcoholism. Blues guitarist Will Shade sings of his experience with "canned heat":

[30] Paul Oliver, 98.

Canned heat is like morphine, it crawls all through your bones
And if you keep on using canned heat mama,
You soon get to the place you just can't leave it alone

When you catch your woman begging nickels and dimes
all up and down the street
She's only hustling them people to get that stuff they call
that old canned heat[31]

All the evils related to alcoholism, such as gambling and violence, were associated with the black community during the Prohibition Era. It was obviously a long way from the temperance the religious white community preached. The focus on such vices in the blues might have implied to white society that their religion did not provide the black community with the relief and comfort they badly needed. Hence the blues became a badly needed outlet for psychological stress and tension, a purpose religion may have served for other people.

Paul Oliver states that the singer seldom sees the songs and lyrics apart from himself, and this becomes evident with regard to the controversy surrounding the blues and the circumstances described in it. The blues is a truthful expression of black life and to white people who were exposed to the music, it characterized life in the black community, hence blacks were seen to be as self-gratifying and morally depraved as they were portrayed in their songs. Many of the vices of Christianity, such as premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality, gambling, alcohol, drugs and violence, were all widely covered in the blues. Not only was it outspoken about it, but it never morally condemned any of it. In the eyes of the Christian establishment, who refused to see beyond the lascivious nature of the blues, it represented a celebration and glorification of everything considered evil.

[31] Paul Oliver, 160.

THE EFFECT AND INFLUENCE OF THE BLUES

As I have argued, the blues is an important expression of African American history and culture. Furthermore, I have come to the conclusion that blues is often oppositional and has the potential of being seen as an implicit social protest. Nevertheless, it is debatable what kind of effect the blues had, what did blues mean to black people when it emerged? What is the importance of blues music? What other kinds of effect did the blues have on the African American community, performers and listeners? I will explore these questions in this subchapter.

As mentioned earlier, the blues arguably evolved into the first popular genre of African American music, and that alone makes it important to the people who fostered it and lived it. At the bottom of all subjects and themes of the blues, is the music perhaps a subconscious attempt to create an identity as free black men and women in America? As mentioned, the blues originated sometime between 1870 and 1900. The impact of the Civil War and emancipation is evident. With the emancipation, many African Americans embraced the American creed and national ideology, which led them to feel more like American citizens. The collective fortitude they had adopted during the days of slavery became less important, as freedom meant individuality to many of the former slaves. This new way of life meant that they saw themselves more as individuals; they had an identity of their own and were not just part of a group anymore. The blues became a way for the individual performer to express his feelings, his thoughts and his take on the world. An overwhelming number of blues lyrics are about the singer's life and surroundings and how they affect him. Paul Oliver validates this in saying that "[t]he blues singer, like the poet, turned his

eyes on the inner soul within and recorded his impressions and reactions to the world without."[32] For the first time in America, black people experienced a sense of self and their own identity, which might have been a step forward for them to feel human and civilized.

However, this new sense of individuality in the black community was not just liberating, it could also evoke a sense of loneliness, and the solitude of the blues can be traced back to the fact that for the first time, many black men had to work alone. They were often alone in the fields, as opposed to the more collective work arrangement they had grown accustomed to during the days of slavery. They would no longer live in the slave quarters, but on their own or with their family. Most importantly, this was also the first time in America that black people had to make a living and support themselves and their families. To have responsibilities and be able to make decisions about their own lives were new experiences for black men, for the first time they had agency. They were essentially on their own when it came to matters of their own life. The black population in the South became more scattered and decentralized, many were uprooted from their family unit and home. Many of the blues lyrics concerned with the theme of loneliness are about women and being left by women, but some also refer to the general state of loneliness, such as Muddy Waters' "Lonesome Road Blues":

> *Have you ever been walking, walking down that old, lonesome road?(twice)*
> *No place to go, whee well brown no place to room and board*
> *Things look so lonesome, down that road ahead*
> *Things look so dark, down that road ahead*[33]

The solitude in blues lyrics is emphasized by its minimalist sound, with simple

[32] Paul Oliver, 278.
[33] http://www.theonlineblues.com/muddy-waters-lonesome-road-blues-lyrics.html.

instrumentation and blue notes in their singing. Solitude has become a characteristic commonly associated with the blues, to the point where it seems almost a cliché.

Despite the fact that the blues is often considered an individual expression by the performer of the blues, the feelings expressed were felt by many, and they were often representative for many African Americans. The blues started spreading throughout the rural south, and later on reached the northern cities, developing various sub-genres along the way. It seems almost self-contradictory that the blues, which is essentially the individual expression of the blues singer, would come to articulate community opinion. However, the audience of blues music had a rather similar demographic background. In the Reconstruction Era in the American South, most poor and working-class blacks had similar backgrounds and suffered the social and cultural legacy of enslavement. So the audience related to the singer and his troubles, because it was representative, not so different from their own lives. Poor blacks at this point had no one to speak for them. The small number of people that formed a black professional elite and black middle class was set on being accepted by the white community and played by their rules, so the rest of the black population was left voiceless. Blues became their expression and it worked as a channel where they could communicate. Thus the blues exceeded its original intent, being the expression of an individual, and became more or less representative for poor African Americans living in the South in the Reconstruction Era and its aftermath. John Lee Hooker verifies how representative the blues can be in saying that "it's not…that I had the hardships that a lot of people had throughout the South and other cities throughout the country, but I do know what they went through…it's not only what happened to you-it's what happened to your foreparents and other people. And that's what makes the blues."[34]

[34] Paul Oliver, Tony Russell, Robert M.W. Dixon, John Godrich and Howard Rye. 203.

Blues became one of the major contributors to the creation of an African American consciousness and identity. Slavery had deprived African Americans of their identity; they lost their names, their families, and their connection to the land they called home. Their background in America made it important for black people and the black community to have a distinct black culture of their own, to grow strong, to sustain and resist racism and discrimination. Columnist Chris Crass quotes bell hooks' words, "oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story",[35] when expressing the importance for the story of black life. The blues is a genre in which the performer and audience generally belong to the black working class, so the lyrics and expression are usually representative of that class and their experience. There were not too many accounts of the life of poor African Americans at that time in history, and in those accounts the blues is a great source of information about black life in this era.

The African American culture was a folk culture that relied heavily on oral tradition and telling stories of past generations was a way to collect and preserve such information. This is reflected in the early blues music, in which the lyrics sound almost like an oral narration. Because of this oral form, the listeners get the sense that the lyrics are authentic and reflect first-hand experience, this makes it a believable account of their history. By telling tales of their daily lives and who they are, they inevitably help construct a collective consciousness. Creating a history, whether or not intentionally, is a significant part of developing an identity for themselves, as a free and emancipated people. Their history becomes a part of their collective identity, but also gives individuals a sense of identity and belonging. Langston Hughes is one

[35] http://colours.mahost.org/articles/crass2.html. Accessed 01.16.2007

of the African American poets who are inspired by the blues and "The Weary Blues" is one of his many poems about black life. In the poem the onlooker is listening to a man play the blues in a nightclub; he describes the melancholy and the sadness of the lyrics and the situation itself. Blues scholar Steven Tracy has interpreted Hughes' poem this way

> [a]ll the singer seems to have is his moaning blues,
> the revelation of 'a black man's soul,' and those blues
> are what helps keep him alive. Part of that ability to sustain
> is apparently the way the blues help him keep his identity.
> Even in singing the blues, he is singing about his life,
> about the way he and other blacks have to deal with white society.
> As his black hands touch the white keys, the accepted Western sound
> of the piano and the form of Western music are changed.
> The piano itself comes to life as an extension of the singer,
> and moans, transformed by the black tradition to a mirror of black
> sorrow that also reflects the transforming power and beauty of the
> black tradition. Finally, it is this tradition that helps keep the singer
> alive and gives him his identity, since when he is done and goes to bed
> he sleeps like an inanimate or de-animated object,
> with the blues echoing beyond his playing, beyond the daily cycles,
> and through both conscious and unconscious states.[36]

In this sense the music helps assert their dignity and sense of worth. The performer makes the music his own and the blues gives him the ability to see himself and his life, thus giving him a cultural identity, which Tracy interprets to be essential in keeping the singer alive.

This new-found identity could also be used as a tool against discrimination and prejudice. Writers and blues scholars William Danaher and Stephen Blackwelder argue that "[b]lues gave voice to the common experience of African Americans at a time when society was overtly organized to obstruct and terminate black self-expression."[37] After the Emancipation Proclamation, Southern whites soon found numerous ways aimed at preventing blacks from becoming a part of society, the

[36] http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/weary.htm. Accessed 02.02.2007.
[37] See "The Emergence of Blues and Rap: A Comparison and Assessment of the Context, Meaning and

establishment of Jim Crow laws was but one of them. In that environment the blues offered a way to see themselves, different from the stereotypical characteristics they were used to. In recognizing themselves as a people with a history and a culture of their own, they could better withstand oppression and marginalization.

Ethnomusicologist Mike Daley argues that "[t]he blues revival depended on a stereotyped representation of black culture."[38] In recent studies of the blues, several scholars have accused the revivalists of romanticizing the blues and the meaning of the blues, emphasizing the blackness of the music, which new scholars find to be clichéd and oversimplified. David Evans is one of the scholars that seems to be critical of giving blues too much of a cultural meaning in terms of representation and identity. He has deemed it "the myth of black essentialism and the blues", claiming that it is a misconception popularized by well known blues connoisseurs and writers such as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Paul Oliver. His argument is that blues music and lyrics are neither representative of African American culture at large, nor appealing to the African American population at large, in the same way that country or alternative rock did not appeal to all segments of white society. I would say that the African American population at the beginning of the 20th century had a more similar demographic background than the general white society that is obviously too diverse for all of them to listen to alternative rock. African slaves that were brought to America were a diverse group; they came from several different regions in Africa, and had different ethnical backgrounds. However, at the time of the Emancipation Declaration, blacks had all been forced to live under the same conditions and had to deal with the repercussions of slavery and the beginning of a new life in "freedom". The blues certainly did not cover all spheres of African American life; the aspiring

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Message" from *Popular Music and Society* (Winter, 1993), 2.
[38] http://www.mikedaley.net/article1.htm Accessed 01.31.2007.

middle class more or less rejected the blues, considering it to be low-brow culture. A large number of the black population was dedicated to Christianity and the black churches; they also rejected it and considered the blues the devil's music. However, in my opinion it was still valuable as an expression in that the most frequently covered themes in blues were common to most African Americans in the era that blues was born. Most performers and listeners had either experienced slavery themselves or the ramifications and legacy of it. The Emancipation Proclamation might have symbolized a new beginning to many blacks, but in reality it did not end poverty, discrimination or reliance upon the white man. African Americans were faced with the possibilities and restrictions of a new beginning, but they were still in a white man's world. As discussed, most blacks could relate to the stories told by the bluesmen, making the blues representative of a very large segment of the contemporary African American population

Paul Oliver observes that:

> "[t]he blues acted as a catalyst for the anger, humiliation, and frustration that tended to demolish the moral codes and spirit of a man, and the act of creating the blues brought satisfaction and comfort both to him and his companions. Essentially the blues singer is a realist and often his statements are accurate portrayals of his state of mind, uninhibited in their self-expression. Singing of his condition can bring relief to his heart and order to his disturbed thoughts, though many a blues indicate that the singer has come close to despair".[39]

I take this to mean that blues can be seen as a catharsis and cleansing experience for the performer. The blues was a meaningful way the singer could channel his resentment and aggravation into his music. Thus he used the blues as an outlet for his emotions and as a way to sort out his confusions. In that sense the blues had a

potentially therapeutic and healing effect. As I discussed earlier, the blues singer expressed his individuality, but the lyrics and music could have important value to the audience, besides being pure entertainment. To the community listening and identifying with the musicians' experience, the music is in some way representative as the expression of a group. Because of their similar background, most of them could relate to the lyrics in the blues. I would also argue that to the extent that the audience and community felt the music was representative of their situation, there is also the possibility of them seeing blues as a cathartic experience. Although few bluesmen had the intention of creating a communal expression, their audience might have felt that the singers' experience had a liberating and healing effect on them as well.

The first impression of blues can be that it is all about loneliness and suffering, because of the lyrics and the way it is performed. However, Mary Ellison claims that blues was never meant to be, and never was, a negative psychological force in the lives of the musicians and their listeners. Blues could also serve as a more positive force in the lives of many musicians. Blues was the music of the people, and music by the people. Lyrics could be humorous, and the lyrics that are more negative can end up having a more positive look on the future. In my opinion, it is not necessarily always a strong belief that the situation of blacks in America is going to improve significantly, but more an acceptance of the singer's personal life situation and hope that their own luck will change. As Bill Gaither demonstrates here:

> *Seem like I was born for bad luck*
> *just a bad luck child and everything goes wrong*
> *I came home this morning*
> *My baby has packed up and gone.*
>
> *I will always remember what my mother told me*
> *and every word she said was true*

[39] Paul Oliver, 54.

I've had so much trouble
I didn't know what in this world to do

I'm gonna quit worryin' and I'm gonna stop grieving
'cause this bad luck will change some day
It's hard to walk in that straight and narrow way[40]

Although the music can be viewed as subversive, oppositional and even as an implicit protest, it still functioned as entertainment in the black community. Blues were played in the juke joints, accompanying other leisure activities like dancing and gambling. Creating a music of their own meant they were capable of greater things.

In his essay "Conservation of Races", W.E.B. Dubois emphasizes that the legacy of African Americans is an important one in American culture: "We are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy".[41] I believe Dubois' main argument in this essay to be that the African-Americans need to preserve and cultivate their own culture and community, and that their culture has much to contribute to the American culture at large. He rules out the possibility of America as a democracy, as black people have never been included in the society at large. However, he asserts that they have a great legacy, unlike anything else in American history. Dubois believes that blacks bring a sense of pathos to America, and blues is mentioned as a music of emotional expression and pathos, and is often seen as the anti-thesis of the constriction of white society.

As I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, the blues had many important functions and a tremendous influence in the lives of many black people. The blues provided African Americans with a voice of their own, it asserted a consciousness and an identity as a free people. Singers were able to express a sense of individuality for

[40] Paul Oliver, 53-54
[41] http://www.webdubois.org/dbConsrvOfRaces.html.

the first time in America. It brought validation to the singer, and also to his or her audience, that their experiences were significant, and so was their contribution. The legacy of blues, not only to the African American community but to America at large, is quite invaluable.

FEMALE BLUES SINGERS

The story of women in the blues is important because it was arguably one of the first expressions of black female sexuality, perhaps female sexuality in general, and therefore they deserve special attention and a subchapter of their own. For many people blues music epitomizes the experience of African American men, expressed by African American men. However, when it comes to protesting social conventions and taboos, the female blues singers were just as explicit as the male blues artists. Women like Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Ida Cox, Mamie Smith and several others became immensely popular for their music and their performances. They are important because they provided a female perspective that countered that of the men, their lyrics are often tales of heartache and disappointment with men. Furthermore, they were thought to be liberated, sexually explicit and had a powerful message.

The historical circumstances in which the female blues singers emerged, are naturally important, and as with the blues in general, it helped shape the music to a great extent. The female blues singer rose to popularity in the 1920s, when many of them started traveling with the vaudeville shows and carnivals. It was the female blues singers that popularized the blues, they were the first to start recording and the first to become professional blues singers. The 1920s was known as the Jazz Age, and

it was the era of the flapper, the young white girls who were seemingly liberated in their lifestyle and behaviour. In reality, the flappers were imitating men more than expressing themselves as independent and freethinking women. The female blues singers, on the other hand, seemed to aspire to liberation on their own terms: "The women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private and into the public sphere"[42]. Hazel Carby makes an important statement about the distinction of the private and public sphere here. Historically, the public sphere was reserved for men, preferably white men. Women, regardless of color, were restricted to the private sphere. In the 1920s, the separation of the two spheres was becoming less absolute, as an increasing number of women worked outside the home. But they had to make do with domestic jobs, like nursing, cooking etc. The female blues singers, however, broke the barriers and established themselves as a highly visible part of the entertainment industry and a force to be reckoned with. As a part of the public sphere, they brought in elements of the private sphere. Their songs were about love, sex, sorrow, rejection, abuse and other themes that were considered to be very private. They may be seen to have been the forerunners of the popular slogan of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s, "the personal is political".

The controversy surrounding these female singers was also due to their representation of themselves as the anti-thesis of white southern womanhood. Instead of playing the role of the fragile and innocent woman, they said what was on their mind, even though most of it was considered to belong within the boundaries of the private realm. Furthermore, they were considered controversial because they

[42] Hazel V. Carby. "Ch 27: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues from The Jazz Cadence of American Culture" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Compendium NORAM4503 Popular Music in the United States as a Reflection of American Culture, (University of Oslo, 2004), 225.

obviously enjoyed their position in the public sphere. Instead of following the ideal of woman that sought fulfillment within their traditional roles as wives and mothers, they attained self-realization on stage. What separated the female blues singers from other women, black or white, is that they went beyond what was expected of women as professionals. Furthermore, they were not simply imitating men in a man's profession; their blues was a natural expression of their lives, just as the male singers expresses their experiences.

The one thing that signalized the breakdown of the barriers between the public and the private sphere more that anything else, was the female blues singers' blatant expression of their sexuality. The myth of the sexually promiscuous black women can be traced back to slavery. During slavery, the slaves were encouraged to be sexually active, so that they could breed more children to work the field. Many black women during slavery were also subjected to rape by their white masters. These sexual relations place the intersection of gender and race in the same hierarchy, thus black women would be positioned above black men due to their relations with white men. This created different kinds of problems in the black community, as mentioned in a previous chapter, but this strengthened position of black women was reflected in the blues.

In the post-slavery days, African Americans were for the first time able to make their own choices about love and sexual partners, and Angela Davis links the explicit sexuality in female blues to freedom in saying that "[t]hey preached about sexual love, and in doing so they articulated a collective experience of freedom, giving voice to the most powerful evidence there was for many black people that slavery no longer existed."[43] This is another way women's blues links the personal to

[43] Angela Davis, 9.

the public and political, seeing sexuality as a symbol of the new freedom of blacks in America. A number of blues lyrics testify to the fact that they were in control of their sexuality. Being sexually liberated also meant being sexually equal to the men in the black community, and men were also at risk of being sexually objectified. Ma Rainey demonstrates this equality in her "Barrel House Blues":

> *Papa likes his sherry, mama likes her port*
> *Papa likes to shimmy, mama likes to sport*
> *Papa likes his bourbon, mama likes her gin*
> *Papa likes his outside women, mama liker her outside men*[44]

There is little evidence in the musical legacy of female blues that conventional romance is linked with sexuality and liberation, which tallies well with their non-conformist attitude towards life. The accounts of their love-life and sexual escapades were, most often unsentimental and direct.

Another break with conventions expressed by the female blues singers can be seen in their physical appearance. Historically, black women were considered the anti-thesis of white southern womanhood, who were supposed to be chaste and virtuous. They were thought to be roughened by hard work and endless child-bearing. But female blues singers changed this. Hazel Carby argues that female blues singers intentionally constructed themselves as sexual subjects through their music.[45] A part of that sexualized image was naturally their appearance. The visual aspect of their performance, the appearance of the singers, naturally had a great impact on the overall impression made by these singers. They often sported gold teeth, furs, jewellery etc. This extravagant appearance reinforced the sexually liberated attitude of the

[44] Angela Davis, 22.

performers. You could tell by looking at pictures of some of the women that their looks were anything but conventional for their contemporary society. They looked very glamorous, compared to other African American women, or working women in general. If you look at pictures of Bessie Smith, she looks like someone out of *The Great Gatsby*, with extravagant dresses, furs and feathers. In a biblical sense their appearance seemed to evoke the story of Adam and Eve, and the woman as the sexual object enticing the man to become a sinner. However, Carby sees their extravagant exterior as the singers' attempt to remake themselves as independent women, from a sexual object of male desire to a subject of their own female desire. This would correspond with many of their lyrics, in which they portrayed themselves as strong, independent women who did not need men (although they may have enjoyed them). The language they used indicated and often validated their position as liberated women. Like their male colleagues, they were often explicit and outspoken, when it came to everything from feelings to sex. Bessie Smith's *Wild about That Thing* is one of many good examples of how sexually explicit female blues singers could be:

> *"Honey Baby, won't you cuddle near, just sweet mama*
> *whisper in your ear. I'm wild about that thing, it makes me*
> *laugh and sing. Give it to me papa, I'm wild about that thing"*[46]

They often used metaphors and symbols in their lyrics, but their message was usually thinly disguised and their point still came across rather blatantly:

> *"Nobody in town can bake a sweet jelly roll like mine, like mine*
> *No other one in town can bake a sweet jelly roll so fine, so fine*
> *It's worth lots of dough, the boys tell me so"*[47]

In any case, they were asserting their sexual independence. The fact that they were not only independent women at this early stage in history, but also black independent

[46] http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/lyrics/bessie_smith/wild_about_that_thing.htm#top
[47] http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/lyrics/bessie_smith/nobody_in_town_can_bake_a_sweet_jelly_roll_like

women, made them a double threat. On the other hand, the black woman is the only one who can assert her sexual freedom, because in the eyes of white society, "she is already hypersexualized within a context of power relations defined by race."[48] Nevertheless, female blues singers (re)defined womanhood in the post-slavery black communities, as they were independent, sexually aware and outspoken when it came to injustice and prejudice.

Angela Davis rejects the skepticism of blues scholars like Samuel Charters and Paul Oliver with regard to the claim that social protest is a part of the blues, arguing that their definition of social protest is too narrow. She claims that " '[p]rotest,' when expressed through aesthetic forms, is rarely a direct call to action. Nevertheless, critical aesthetic representation of a social problem must be understood as constituting powerful social and political acts. "[49] Furthermore, she says that "public articulation of complaint", of which there are many instances in the blues, must be seen as a form of contestation of oppressive conditions, even when it lacks a dimension of organized political protest."[50] This, I believe, is essential to the blues and its expression. Although not initially meant as a direct protest to agitate the masses or make them take political action, it still contains elements of social protest in that it tells the story of African Americans and their struggles. She uses female blues singers to demonstrate her point; the focus of her argument is the lyrics of "Ma" Rainey, Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith. Davis uses Bessie Smith's "Washwoman's Blues" to demonstrate how women's blues can contain implicit social protest.

All day long I'm slavin', all day long I'm bustin'suds
Gee, my hands are tired, washin' out these dirty duds

_mine.htm#top
[48] Angela Davis, 108.
[49] Angela Davis, 101.
[50] Angela Davis, 101.

Lord, I do more work than forty-'leven Gold Dust Twins
Got myself a achin' from my head down to my shins

So I do washin' to make my livelihood
Oh, the washwoman's life, it ain't a bit of good[51]

These lyrics reveal that social and economic circumstances forced black women to work for a living. In the first stanza, Smith equates this work with slavery, and is essentially saying that things have not improved much. The song tells of how black women, unlike their white counterparts, had to work to make a living and how they struggled to survive. Davis also uses Smith's "Poor Man's Blues" to show how women's blues can express social protest:

Mister rich man, rich man, open your heart and mind
Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times

While you're livin' in your mansion, you don't know
what hard times means
Poor working man's wife is starvin', your wife's livin' like a queen[52]

In this song as well, Smith validates the protest element of women's blues, as she is singing about the social conditions that have defined life for many African Americans, men and women. In "Poor Man's Blues" the protest is not just an implicit one, on account of the personal experience and life of the singer. Smith takes it a step further and makes a direct and general statement about the social conditions that constitute poverty. This inevitably becomes a race issue, considering that the majority of black people lived in poverty.

Female blues singers have received criticism for different reason. Like their male counterparts, they were criticized for being too outspoken and direct in their

[51] Angela Davis, 98-99.
[52] Angela Davis, 96.

lyrics. Their lyrics became synonymous with their personas and life, and they were considered to live unconventional and immoral lives. Furthermore, critics have questioned their empowered, sexually liberated onstage persona, and seen it as a way of reinforcing the power they did not have in their private lives. Some have claimed that they were not at all liberated, because so many of their songs are about men, and how men have let them down or how they have been left by men. Some of the most frequent subjects complement those of the male blues singers, like migration and the railroad, domestic troubles etc. However, in their lyrics they are never afraid to speak their minds; they are not suppressing their feelings, which women were supposed to do. In the songs where the lyrics are not so angry and outspoken, their voice often bears witness of their feelings. Tales of deceit and infidelity were often tales of rage and anger, and not just heartbreak and loneliness. The fact that these women were on a public stage, singing about their personal lives, expressing their own feelings, makes them more independent than their contemporaries and even generations to come. At some point they remade themselves to be subjects, rather than objects.

In retrospect, women's blues was essentially different from men's blues in many ways. Much due to their looks and stage performance, a wide audience gained knowledge about the blues. These singers were the first women in America to express themselves in this way, and to create a public sphere where women expressed their sexuality while at the same time making a statement. In many ways the female blues singers made the most powerful expression of protest and dissent, because their combined racial and gender identity made them doubly controversial.

CHAPTER II. HIP HOP

THE ROOTS AND BIRTH OF HIP HOP- HOW DID WE GET THERE?

There were many interesting developments in several genres of African- American music between the era of blues and hip hop. I will not discuss in detail the chronology of black music during this period, covering almost hundred years of vital music history. However, I want to give a brief introduction to how rap music was born and where it is rooted, in terms of its musical legacy. I will then move on to explain the roots of the hip hop culture and rap music, in terms of social, economic and political circumstances.

Hip hop alum and Wu Tang Clan member RZA and Amiri Baraka are both interviewed in the documentary *Breaking the Rules*. They both trace hip hop and the expression of the hip hop generation back to the blues, and to bebop. With blues comes the legacy of the spoken word, and with bebop comes the element of improvisation. Another legacy of jazz that is mentioned is scatting, to find a rhythm. The beginning of jazz is often dated to the early 20th century; however, the more controversial aspects of jazz are often seen to begin with the bebop of the 1940s and 50s. Jazz, being a genre that was also accepted and listened to by white people, developed in opposition to the establishment in this era. The art of improvisation ruled over the written note, and the jazz musicians, their community and lifestyle, were seen as a protest against conventionality.

The 1950s was also the decade that saw the birth of rock'n' roll. African-American performers were left in the shadow of Elvis, but were still by many

considered to be the founders of the genre. Rock was just as controversial as the other genres, if not more so. The soul and disco of the 1960s and 70s may not have been as controversial as genres, or expressed a lot of criticism and protest. However, there was controversy connected with the genres and musicians of those decades as well. Nina Simone was one of the performers that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement with her music. Several of her most popular songs are about this struggle, like *Mississippi Goddam*, or about growing up with the stigma of race in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. James Brown was another performer widely acknowledged to an activist on behalf of the African American community, perhaps most famous in that respect is his *(Say It Loud) I'm Black and I'm Proud*. Throughout the latter part of the 20th century, there were artists that used their music to express what it was like to be black in the United States of America. However, nothing would compare to the days of blues and jazz until the birth of hip hop. And when it was born, it soon became clear that nothing could ever compare to hip hop music and the hip hop generation.

The term hip hop is used more and more loosely today, so a definition and clarification is in order. Originally, hip hop culture consisted of four elements: rap, graffiti, break dancing and DJing. To spread knowledge, or "droppin' science", is by many considered to be a fifth element, which partly explains the cultural significance that hip hop has gained. Hip hop contains elements from various music styles, from all over the world. The West African oral tradition of the griot, a traveling poet and singer, is one of the influences on African-American music in general, perhaps especially blues and hip hop. Hip hop culture can be traced back to the 1970s, in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens in New York City. In the early 1970s, DJ's like Kool Herc and Afrika Baambaata, started playing at block parties and in back yards. Their music style was inspired by Jamaican music and especially the dub style, a

reggae sub-genre. In dub music, the DJ's themselves were at times speaking on top of the music they played, often referred to as "toasting". And the block parties were no exception. There were often hosts at these parties, Masters of Ceremony (MC's), and they started talking on top of the music. Eventually the rapping became synchronized with the beat, and the rhymes became more complex and meaningful. In the documentary *Breaking the Rules*, vanguard rapper Kool Herc talks about how they would set up their equipment just about everywhere and start a party. This is one of the reasons for early hip hop's success, it was available to everyone, and everyone could listen and participate in the parties.

The musical influences broadened in the 1970s and 80s, and went from reggae to funk and rock, and also in some cases, disco. Blues music was also a great influence, in terms of content and cultural significance, which I will get back to later. Blues was also influential in terms of stylistic features, the way it was performed. Many blues artists engaged in what was referred to as "speaking", meaning that they sometimes spoke accompanied by their music. Another African American tradition the blues musician popularized was "the dozens". This oral tradition consists of two people going up against each other and challenging each other to come up with the best insult to the competition. This tradition evolved into the hip hop freestyle battle. Since the early 70s, the hip hop genre has evolved into a multitude of sub-genres, most notably gangsta rap. And in the last few years we have seen the emergence of alternative hip hop, cornbread rap (also known as Southern rap), crunk (another form of southern rap), dancehall (a fusion with reggae), etc. Today, hip hop is more commercialized and mainstream than ever before. Hip hop is no longer just a music genre, it is a giant industry within popular culture. It is still gaining more popularity, and there is no telling what comes next for hip hop. However, in this thesis I will

focus on the hip hop from the early and mid 1990s, as that is arguably the era when hip hop had its most influential and important expression and message.

This part of the chapter is about the social, political and economic circumstances in America that gave birth to hip hop, and helps to explain why it has become music of dissent, and a music made by outsiders. Bakari Kitwana refers to the people born between 1965 and 1984 as the hip hop generation.[53] They are children of the Civil Rights generation, and they were the first generation to grow up in America without legal segregation. The Civil Rights generation had many reasons to be hopeful that their children would grow up in an America for the first time committed to its official creed of equality. As the Second World War ended and the world community went through big changes, America arose as a superpower and the leading democracy of the world. The heightened consciousness of their democratic ideals and a booming economy spurred hope of better times for African Americans. Some African Americans in the post-war era experienced social mobility and moved out to the suburbs. And with the Civil Rights Movement achieving its legal objectives by the mid 60s, things were looking brighter for African Americans in general as well.

At the same time, improvements in transportation and communication opportunities led to the "white flight" to the suburbs in the post-war era, leaving the majority of blacks and other minority groups in the inner city districts. This way the gains made by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s would mean little to the inner-city black kids a decade later. Ronald Takaki[54] points out that the Civil Rights Movement was unable to change the economic structures of racial inequality, what Martin Luther King called "the airtight cage of poverty". As the postwar baby

[53] See *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York, Basic *Civitas* Books, 2002), 4.
[54] See "America as New World" *'Borderland'*, in *Major Problems in American History Since 1945*, ed. Robert Griffith and Paula Baker (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 552.

boomers entered adulthood between 1960 and 1980, the labor force grew by leaps and bounds, almost doubling between 1970 and 1980. Accompanied by the economic crisis of the 1970s and the following rise in unemployment, the situation worsened. As many companies relocated their factories to low-wage countries, or to the suburban areas in the U.S., people lost their jobs and inner city areas were drained. The economic crisis of the 1970s hit the African American communities especially hard, and the black underclass grew in the urban ghettoes. By the 1970s the inner city districts were impoverished and without resources. The inner city slums were not able to provide what was needed in terms of social services, as they were not able to pay high taxes. In suburbia, where the wealthy had moved, the need for social services was much less. This fiscal disparity became increasingly visible in the 1970s, as the inner city neighborhoods had been drained of resources over the last decades and urban decay kept spreading. Urban decay means inadequate housing, inadequate schools and education facilities, and inadequate health care. This resulted in malnutrition, young kids dropping out of school, and made African American and other poverty-stricken minorities in the cities, dependent on the welfare system. Small wonder that the disappointment with America's unfulfilled promises of equality became increasingly apparent among the children of the underclass.

With an economy where unemployment was the norm for unskilled young people, an underground economy emerged, and drugs became a safe bet in making money. Heroin addiction and trafficking spread rapidly in American cities in the mid 1970s, and in the ghettoes especially. According to Nelson George, "[h]eroin emboldened the black criminal class, which had been clustered in numbers running, prostitution, fencing, and robbery, to expand and become more predatory."[55] He

[55] See *Hip Hop America* (New York, Penguin Books, 1998), 35.

claims that heroin brought forth a new black criminal entrepreneurship, and made the black communities more dangerous and more vicious. By the 1980s, the crack epidemic was a fact of life in the ghettoes, and it would be one of the biggest influences on the hip hop generation. The crack industry employed many people, especially young people who had dropped out of school and/or could not get a job. Crack is a highly addictive drug and even more importantly, it can be produced very cheaply. According to the DEA, crack rocks are estimated to be between 75-90% pure cocaine[56]. Due to an increase in the growth of coca leaves in Latin America, the prices dropped significantly in the 1980s. For people who could not afford other types of drugs, crack was the cheap solution. The legal system is also a problem for African Americans. An example of the racist nature of the legal system is the difference in sentencing for crack cocaine and powder cocaine. The ratio is 100-1, possession of 5 grams of crack or 500 grams of powder cocaine has a minimum sentence of five years. Since crack is cheap, and primarily a drug used by blacks, and cocaine a drug preferred by rich white people, this disparity in sentencing contributed to the soaring number of young black men who were incarcerated during this period. To people in the ghettoes, with no dreams left and no realistic life prospect, becoming more disillusioned and alienated from the rest of the nation, crack offered escape and a potential income way beyond what they could normally expect. Rapper Nas puts it this way;

> *It was my version of the blues/droppin' our schools/*
> *The crack epidemic had rap representin new rules/*[57]

Politics is also a contributing factor to the emergence of hip hop, as the political climate of the 1980s did little for African Americans and other minority

[56] http://www.streetdrugs.org/crack.hmt.
[57] http://www.lyricsdir.com/nas-last-real-nigga-alive-lyrics.html

groups. The Reagan administration seemed completely out of tune with what was going on in the ghettoes of American cities, demonstrated by Nancy Reagan's simplistic "Just Say No" campaign, addressing the drug problems of the country. The inauguration of Reagan in 1981 would mark the beginning of an era of racist policies. Under his administration the federal and state welfare rolls to AFDC were cut, and other programs that affected the lives of blacks, such as the federal housing department, were no longer a priority. His spending on defense left domestic causes at the bottom of the agenda. Reagan's economic policies concentrated the wealth of the nation even more in the hands of the small white upper class. African Americans' distrust of the government is old and runs deep, for obvious reasons. The Civil Rights Movement might have undone some of the damage, but the social, political and economic conditions that African Americans were experiencing during the 1970s and 1980s brought on an anti-government mood within the poor black communities.

With the activism of the Civil Rights Movement came the Black Power Movement, represented by those who felt the inadequacy of trying to co-exist with the white community. It was a separatist movement that would not compromise with the white leaders of the country and adopted a more violent approach. The hip hop generation lacked a broad mass movement to support them. The political and social climate in general in the 1970s and 1980s was not attuned to political activism. The collectivism and activism of the 1960s had shifted towards a more self-centered individualism, and left a vacuum for young activists dedicated to social change.

Nelson George mentions on several occasions in his book *Hip Hop America* how the black middle class have left the poor underclass blacks behind. The black middle class failed to understand the situation of young, poor blacks. And even when they saw the problems, they did not seriously try to

understand how the situation got that way, or try to do something about it. The leaders of the black middle class were supposed to be the leaders and spokesmen of the entire black community. As these leaders distanced themselves from the black underclass, poor blacks were left with no powerful ally, and no one to champion their cause. So not only was the urban ghettos drained of resources by the white community, but even those blacks who had the opportunity and means to help, refused to do so. One can hardly wonder that desperation, depression and hopelessness marked the lives of inner-city black youths.

It should be noted that the hip hop culture was not created by African American kids alone, but by young people from different minority groups, most notably Latin American kids. Many of the first b-boys and b-girls (break dancers) were Latin American. It is hardly surprising that hip hop was created by young people who were considered outcasts by mainstream society. The kids who created hip hop were largely kids with backgrounds in gangs. Both mc-ing, graffiti and breaking can be seen as related to gang activity. All of these elements are about competition and survival. Graffiti artist Grandmaster Caz in *Breaking the Rules* talks about how graffiti was another part of hip hop culture that was a protest and reaction to their oppression and general ill treatment. He observes how graffiti was dangerous and illegal, and thus created the excitement of risk-taking. This performance art and way of expressing themselves had parallels in their lives. The protest in their music is further emphasized by the way they dress, the music videos, the beats, all function as a revolt against the establishment.

Ronald Takaki[58] refers to Langston Hughes' poem *Harlem* in which he asks,

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up, like a raisin in the sun?

[58] Takaki, Ronald, 559.

With the new underclass of poor blacks in mind, Takaki asks what happens when you do not even have a dream at all. Hip hop emerged out of a situation of people who had no dreams left. Their every day lives were marked by hopelessness, deprivation and despair. It was an expression of the lives of poor young minority kids who had few opportunities and life prospects. It went from being an expression of their thoughts about their lives to becoming a call to change the status quo of this hopeless situation.

HIP HOP AS PROTEST MUSIC

Tricia Rose has claimed that "[r]ap music is a contemporary stage for the theater of the powerless,"[59] in her 1994 book *Black Noise*. In some cases music can be written with the purpose of accompanying social and/or political movements. In other cases, music can be written to initiate and set the agenda for new socio-political movements. Hip hop is a case of the latter, I would claim.

The era mid-1980s to the early 1990s was the era known as the golden age of hip hop. During these years hip hop went from being an underground culture to a pop cultural phenomenon. It also became obvious that hip hop was not merely a musical genre but a counter-culture movement. Some would say the hip hop culture can be seen as a continuation of the protest and counter-culture movements of the 1960s. In the documentary film *Breaking the Rules,* hip hop alumni RZA and writer and activist Amiri Baraka both trace rapping back to blues and jazz. Both of these genres can be regarded as a protest against white society. The difference is that hip hop emerged in an era where African Americans were more free to speak their mind. The

hip hop culture was the first African American counter-cultural movement that carried their protest against their oppression to the world at large, reminding everyone that words are powerful and can make a difference.

Tricia Rose describes African American traditions of dissent in music this way:

> "Slave dances, blues lyrics, Mardi Gras parades, Jamaican patois, toasts, and signifying all carry the pleasure and ingenuity of disguised criticism of the powerful. Poor people learn from experience when and how explicitly they can express their discontent. Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion".[60]

She describes this music of resistance as "cultural glue" that keeps the community going strong, and she attempts to explain why and how rap has become what it is, in opposition. She applies James Scott's theory of public and hidden social transcripts from his *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, to the politics of the hip hop generation and rap music. According to Scott's theory, "power relations are solidified and challenged through social transcripts"[61]. The public transcripts are the open interaction between those in control of society and those being controlled. Power holders are deliberately complicating and politicizing the public stage in order to prevent the subordinates from participating on that stage. The hidden transcripts on the other hand, are those critical of and in resistance to power holders and their politics, and they take place off the public stage. Hip hop culture and politics are an example of a hidden transcript. As the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy express it in their song *Music and Politic:*

[60] See *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 100.

If I ever would stop thinking about music and politics,
I would tell you that music is the expression of emotion,
and that politics is merely the decoy of perception.[62]

I take this to mean that the public transcripts are just a"decoy of perception", a way to get people not to think about the reality of the world and their situation, not unlike Marx' definition of religion as the opium of the people. The public transcripts are examples of tokenism, as the people in control hope to satisfy the subordinates with the public transcripts, knowing that it is not real power or communication. "Resistive hidden transcripts that attempt to undermine this power block do so by insinuating a critique of the powerful in stories that revolve around symbolic and legitimated victories over power holders."[63] Rappers often use metaphors when talking about their lives, or their situation, and this use of metaphors also seems to be one of the legacies from blues music. That can be seen as partly validating Rose's point that there is a tradition of dissent and protest, in a more or less disguised form, taking place, although metaphors in hip hop are not necessarily camouflaging things they cannot say out loud, as rappers do not seem to have a lot of limitations today. The metaphors and codes of this hidden transcript have many purposes, as Rose points out, they "validate the perceptions of the less powerful"[64]. The popularity of hip hop music and culture validated and made legitimate the views and opinions of the hip hop generation, in terms of what they spoke out against. The rap of the golden era is often talked about as conscious rap, which in most cases means political rap. Many of the political rappers of this era, most notably Public Enemy's Chuck D and KRS-One, consider themselves "knowledge warriors" and "prophets of rage". As mentioned previously, the urban poor blacks were often left behind by their

[61] Tricia Rose, 100.
[62] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/d/disposableheroesofhiphoprisylyrics/musicandpoliticslyrics.html
[63] Tricia Rose, 100.

community leaders, and the vacuum was filled in large part by rappers.

Rob Rosenthal, in his essay "Serving the Movement: The Role(s) of Music",[65] claims that music is important to those already committed to the social movement, as it might help to keep the spirit and unity intact. He believes music also can be a helpful tool in the creation of a movement. Among the most important functions music can have in this context are education, recruitment and mobilization. The focus in hip hop on police brutality, government politics and controversial history can all be seen as educational, I believe. Although many of the songs come off as statements of anger and desperation, there is also a strong message in them. A lot of what these rappers were talking about in their lyrics was information young people could not find elsewhere at this time. History is always written by the victors, and the debate on what kind of history should be taught in American schools is an ongoing debate. Rap music wants to tell the truth about black people. Chuck D would refer to rap music and rappers as black people's CNN. Rosenthal goes on to say that if music can educate people. it is fair to assume that people will move beyond awareness and get involved in a movement. And once involved in a movement, music can help mobilize these forces. The rappers and the lyrics I have focused on in this chapter, wanted more that just to educate, they wanted black people and the community to empower themselves and to take action. They recognized the responsibility the people had in making their community a better and stronger one. KRS-One demonstrates this in his "2nd Quarter Free Throws":

> *Hip-Hop could build it's own secret society*
> *but first you and I got to unify*
> *stop the negativity and control our creativity*
> *the rich is getting richer, so why we ain't richer?*
> *could it be we still thinking like niggas?*

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[64] Tricia Rose, 100

[65] See "Serving the Movement: The Role(s) of Music", *Popular Music and Society*, (Fall-Winter, 2001)

educate yourselves, make your world view bigger
visualize wealth and put yourselves in the picture![66]

I think hip hop and rap prove Rosenthal's arguments right. Hip hop is by many people now considered to be a social movement, which I will get back to in a later chapter, and without rap music there would be no such movement, I believe. Rap music educated, recruited and mobilized the hip hop generation, as I hope to demonstrate throughout this part of the thesis.

The focus on hip hop in this paper will be primarily on that of the golden age, where I find hip hop to be most productive and important, in regards to lyrical content. Furthermore, in studying rap lyrics of this era, I found it possible to make a distinction between what I have called sociological hip hop and political hip hop. Both of these "subgenres" of hip hop manifest that hip hop carries on the tradition of African American to express dissent and opposition.

DON'T PUSH ME: SOCIOLOGICAL RAP

The rap of the golden era is in large part a depiction of life in the urban ghettoes. This chapter is about sociological hip hop, by which I mean hip hop that portrays and illustrates the social, political, economic and cultural conditions that emerge out of urban poverty. I will attempt to explore the elements that can be seen as oppositional, a protest and/or a social commentary. I will, however, not devote too much time to this chapter, as I find political hip hop more distinctive of the hip hop genre. Nevertheless, I do think it is important to bring up sociological rap and make a

[66] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/k/krsonelyrics/stquarterthecommentarylyrics.html

distinction between these "subgenres" because I find that sociological hip hop has close relations to blues and can be seen as a direct continuation of blues. Furthermore, I believe political hip hop is a continuation of sociological, but that it takes hip hop to another level in terms of protest music; this will be discussed in my next chapter.

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner mention briefly in their essay "Rap, Black Rage and Racial Difference"[67] how the killings of famous rappers Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. broke down the distinction between art and life, as their deaths were much like the violent scenarios in their lyrics. I believe one of the reasons that make hip hop culture unique, and have largely contributed to its success, is that there never was such a distinction. Hip hop in its early days is one of the truest forms of expression. The killings of Tupac and Biggie might have revealed the distinction between art and life to the public; however, for rappers and people in the black community this discrepancy would seem non-existent. Rap lyrics up to this point in time were in large part autobiographical and depicted the rappers' trials and tribulations in the ghetto. As with Tupac and Biggie, the violent scenarios in their lyrics were already a part of their everyday life. Even if their deaths came as a shock to many, this was in large part due to their status as celebrities, and not because it was shocking that a young black man in the ghetto was shot and killed. In Tupac's "Soulja's Story", he raps that "*[t]he fast life ain't everything they told ya*/*Never get much older, following the tracks of a soulja."*[68] In my opinion this was never just a song lyric or his art, it was a description of Tupac's life, and it was representative for many young African-American men.

Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five's "The Message" is often mentioned as one of the first and most influential hip hop songs. The song was released in 1982,

[67] http://enculturation.gmu.edu/2_2/best-kellner.html. Accessed 10.25.2006

making it one of the first hip hop songs to sell gold. More importantly, it is one of the first hip hop songs that contain important social commentary:

> *Don't push me 'cuz I'm close to the edge*
> *I'm trying not to lose my head, It's like a jungle sometimes*
> *It makes me wonder how I keep from getting under.*
> *A child is born with no state of mind, Blind to the ways of mankind*
> *God is smilin' on you but he's frownin' too*
> *Because only God knows what you'll go through*
> *You'll grow in the ghetto livin' second-rate*
> *And your eyes will sing a song called deep hate*
> *The places you play and where you stay*
> *Looks like one great big alleyway*[69]

The message that Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five try to convey is what it is like to be born into and live ghetto life in America. Furthermore, the lyric gives a perspective on what impact that life has on the people who have lived it. It describes first-hand what that kind of life does to your way of thinking about your situation and the world around you. The desperation of the lyricist is very obvious and powerful, the lack of hope characterizes the future for people growing up in the ghetto. The image of a jungle is a powerful metaphor in this song. A jungle often means, at least to western culture and people who have never been in one, someplace dark and confusing. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five equate their situation to being in a dark jungle, unable to find their way out into the light; to them it seems as if every possible way they might take ends up in the same place. This is also emphasized in the last quoted line, that everywhere you go, it all seems like a big alleyway. There really is no way out of the ghetto, it is a dead-end life.

The blues is secular in its nature, for the most part. Hip hop is more complex in the matter of religion, as there are also many conflicting voices. In cases where

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[68] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/t/tupaclyrics/souljasstorylyrics.html
[69] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/g/grandmasterflashlyrics/themessagelyrics.html.

God is mentioned in songs, the rapper is often questioning God and his ways, but not altogether rejecting the notion of God. However, many members of the hip hop community, KRS-One being one, also assert that hip hop can be seen as a religion of its own. The portrayal of God in "The Message" is ambiguous, as he is smiling but also frowning. It is clear that the rapper (Melle Mel) acknowledges the existence of God and his compassion for what they are going through. At the same time it seems that the presence of God makes no difference to the facts of life in the ghetto, neither does the rapper seem to expect that his life prospects will look brighter.

African Americans, whether born into the ghettoes or into suburbia, have always had to live with the stigma of being black. That means being a deviation from the norm, being second-rate. As discussed in one of the blues subchapters, this is related to the psychological wages of being white. No matter if you are white and poor, you will always have the advantage of having the right color on your skin. Just like being black will always be the opposite of that, namely second-rate. The next line of the song; "And our eyes will sing a song called deep hate", expresses how the feeling of being second-rate in their own country affects them as a people. Not only will they develop hatred towards the government and decision makers, but towards white people in general, for treating them like outcasts. Most importantly, the hopelessness of this situation will generate self-hatred amongst poor black men, as they never expect to be given a fair chance in life, and all that is left is hate.

De La Soul's "Ghetto Thang" is another good example of a song that echoes the problems of the urban ghettoes.

> *(Mary had a little lamb)*
> *That's a fib, she had two twins though and one crib*
> *Now she's only fourteen, what a start*
> *But this effect is ground common in these parts*
> *Now life in this world can be such a bitch*

And dreams are often torn and shattered and hard to stitch
Negative's the attitude that runs the show
When the stage is the G-H-E-T-T-O[70]

This excerpt describes the entrapment felt by many blacks in the ghetto and the limitations of their possibilities in life. The desperation is not as deep as in "The Message", but more from a matter-of-fact point of view. This might be due to the fact that "The Message" is told from a first person point of view, which makes it more intense. "Ghetto Thang" is a third person point of view, but it is nevertheless clear that it is a depiction of someone who knows ghetto life first-hand. In my opinion, that only serves to validate the portrayal, as it is subjective but is able to maintain an objective angle at the same time. A closer look at this song reveals that it can actually be used as an example of both sociological and political hip hop. Although much of the lyrics are about the hard life in the ghetto and the shattered dreams of those who live in it, it also contains a few lines that are meant to encourage people to make a change within the ghetto;

For this is where we stand, for the True tell
Ghetto gained a ghetto name for ghetto ways
Now there could be some ghetto gangs and ghetto play
If ghetto thang can have its way in ghetto range
There must be some ghetto love and ghetto change[71]

In this excerpt De La Soul seem to say that they accept that the ways of the ghetto are not necessarily all negative, but that it needs to be developing at the same time and make some change.

The depiction of ghetto life is a large element of rap music and hip hop culture, it tells a story of social and cultural conditions, as well as of the personal

[70] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/d/delasoullyrics/ghettothanglyrics.html.
[71] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/d/delasoullyrics/ghettothanglyrics.html.

thoughts and struggles of the rappers and the people around them. And they tell these stories because they want to tell the world what their lives are really like. It seems fair to draw a line between blues and sociological hip hop, as they are both portraying the lives of poor working class African Americans. Sociological hip hop is more explicit than the blues, expressing clearly the unfair treatment they are given, however that is only a natural consequence of the times they are living in.

On March 12th 2007, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five were inducted in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Rapper Jay-Z presented them with the award saying: '[t]he shot heard' around the world was fired from the South Bronx.'[72] This reference to "The Message"validates my point, that sociological hip hop made their voices heard. However, it would take an ever more direct type of lyrics for hip hop to expand into the culture that we see today.

DROPPIN' SCIENCE: POLITICAL RAP

Different kinds of music throughout history have contained elements of social protest and opposition. Some have advanced to vigorously encourage their audience to take political action, and their music is much more specific in their claims. In hip hop there is a fine line between what I have chosen to call sociological hip hop, which I discussed in the previous chapter, and this politically designed music. The two categories are not fundamentally different since the political can be seen as a continuation of the sociological. In this chapter I will discuss political hip hop, which I believe to be a continuation of sociological hip hop, but it is more confrontational

[72] http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/13/arts/music/13hall.html?_r=1&oref=slogin. Accessed 03.10.2007

and specific in its criticism and addresses the issues of ghetto life in an even more activating way. Political rap was more explicit and even more conscious, as it focused more on concrete institutional criticism. Rappers like Chuck D and KRS-One acknowledged that hip hop could be used for educational purposes. Bakari Kitwana has also emphasized the need for the hip hop generation to educate themselves. And to the leaders of the hip hop generation, knowledge is power. This type of conscious rap is about uncovering and unveiling how African Americans live in the ghettoes, as well as challenging and telling people to take action. More specifically, it is as a critique of organized American institutions. Many artists fit into the description I just gave of political hip hop; I have chosen to focus my attention on Public Enemy and KRS-One.

Tricia Rose has pointed out that "[t]he police, the government, and dominant media apparatuses are the primary points of institutional critique in rap, and these institutions are primarily critiqued by male rappers".[73] The most frequently covered themes in rap from these years are police brutality and black cops, racial governmental politics and policies and the negative focus on rap in the media. I will here focus mainly on the critique of the police and the government. The police are the authority that has the most direct contact with the people, and their presence in the inner city ghettoes, which consists largely of minorities, is usually not a social call. Police brutality and use of excessive force are common topics in rap, as well as the attitude of police officers. KRS-One is one of the rappers who has most explicitly expressed his contempt for the police, his famous song "Sound of da Police" is the most notable example of this:

There could never really be justice on stolen land/

[73] Tricia Rose, 105.

Are you really for peace and equality/
Or when my car is hooked, you know you wanna follow me/
Your laws are minimal/
Cause you won't even think about looking at the real criminal[74].

This song was released in 1993, a few years before Amadou Diallo and 9/11, when racial profiling was an everyday practice. The United States has a long history of institutional racism, and according to the ACLU, racial profiling became further systematized in 1986 with a DEA program called "Operation Pipeline", which trained police officers to use pretext stops to find drugs in cars[75]. In 1996 a Supreme Court decision supported law enforcement's right to stop and search vehicles[76]. In this excerpt, KRS claims that as soon as a black man has a nice car, is "hooked up", the police assume you are involved in something criminal and want to check your car. This situation is often referred to as DWB, Driving While Black, and is one of the most blatant actions of racial profiling. At several points in the lyrics, *your laws are minimal* is an example from this excerpt, he accuses police officers of not following the rules, making them the villains. People in the black urban ghettoes have always been critical of the police for their treatment of black people. They have also often accused the police of making their own rules for themselves. Police corruption is also a familiar theme in rap, and "Sound of da Police" is no exception: *You claim I'm sellin' crack/but you be doin' that*[77]. In the first line of the excerpt, KRS states that there can never be justice in America because it is a stolen land. He is presumably referring to Native Americans and colonists, but I believe he is applying his rhetoric to African-Americans as well. He questions the police officers' commitment to upholding peace and equality, accusing them of being more committed to maintaining

[74] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/k/krsonelyrics/soundofdapolicelyrics.html.
[75] http://www.aclufl.org/take-action/download_resources/racialprofilingpage2002.cfm#history.
[76] http://www.ethnicmajority.com/racial_profiling.htm.

the status quo, the power of white men, than doing the right thing. In the second verse of the song, today's police officers are paralleled to the authority figures from the days of slavery:

> *The overseer had the right to get ill*
> *And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill/*
> *The Officer has the right to arrest*
> *And if you fight back they put a hole in your chest/*
> *They both ride horses*
> *After 400 years I have got no choices*[78].

According to KRS-One, the work the police officers are doing is the equivalent of plantation overseers. It also seems a fair assumption to say that he might equate the government to the slave-owners. In the scenarios he describes, black men are being deprived of all their rights, both by plantation overseers and police officers, who all believe that a black man's life is worth nothing. According to KRS-One, America has not really made any racial progress since the days of slavery and black men are still without any rights or individual agency. I think that in the case of this song and many other rap songs as well, it becomes evident that to the hip hop generation, police officers are the epitome of white power in America. They are the authority figures that most people deal with most directly, in their everyday lives. To many they also symbolize the slavery, racism and deprivation of ancient American history. Rose sees the police as "soldiers of war", and the urban ghettoes as the battlefield, in "Reagan's War on Drugs"[79], and that metaphor explains a lot of the resentment black people have against the police.

However, not only white police officers are the subject of many rap lyrics. Black police officers are frequently attacked as well, most notably in KRS-One's

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[77] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/k/krsonelyrics/soundofdapolicelyrics.html
[78] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/k/krsonelyrics/soundofdapolicelyrics.html
[79] Tricia Rose, 106.

"Black Cop":

> *Your authorization says shoot your nation/*
> *You wanna uphold the law, what could you do to me?/*
> *The same law dissed the whole black community/*
> *You can't play both sides of the fence*[80].

I think this resentment of black police officers can be seen as a part of the conflict between poor blacks and middle-class blacks. Black police officers are seen as race traitors by the poor urban blacks and the hip hop generation. They could have been an important resource in the black community, instead they chose to be on the "other side of the fence", with the white community. This reveals the "with us or against us" attitude of hip hop in this era. There are only two worlds, one white and one black, and if you are a police officer, you play on the white team. Rap in the early days had a very uncompromising way of seeing the world, and their political views tended to shift toward a more black nationalist stance. In "Black Cop" KRS-One raps *[b]lack slave turned black cop is not logical*[81], if compared to the second quote of "Sound of da Police", there are similarities. There is something illogical in a black man having police power, especially if the criminal happened to be white. It seems KRS lets his audience know that there is something wrong if a black man is a police officer.

> *Recently police trained a black cop*
> *To stand on the corner, and take gunshot*
> *This type of warfare isn't new or a shock*
> *It's black on black crime again non stop*[82].

In this second excerpt from "Black Cop", KRS-One also criticizes white power holders. He accuses them of turning black people against each other and using black police officers to keep poor black people down. Although he initially in this song

[80] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/k/krsonelyrics/blackcoplyrics.html
[81] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/k/krsonelyrics/blackcoplyrics.html

accuses black police officers of being race traitors and upholding the status of white authorities, he also here seems to think that black police officers are just the marionettes of white society. Glen Ford of the African American online publication *The Black Commentator* claims that black on black crime is a result of long term devaluation, dehumanization and white racism. Black people have been indoctrinated to believe that a black person's life is less worth, and therefore crimes against fellow blacks are taken less seriously[83]. This, I believe, is what KRS-One is trying to say, amongst other things.

As mentioned above, the government is also a large element of the institutional criticism in rap music. African Americans' distrust of government has obvious historical roots and runs deep. The Black Power Movement explicitly expressed their view, and the hip hop generation adopts parts of the movement's attitudes and rhetoric. This is a theme that can be found frequently in lyrics from the golden age, as well as in more contemporary lyrics, this following except is from Public Enemy's "Party For Your Right To Fight":

> *Power, Equality, And we're out to get it*
> *I know some of you aren't wid it/*
> *This party started right in '66, with a pro-Black radical mix*
> *Then at the hour of twelve, some force cut the power,*
> *and emerged from hell/*
> *It was our so called government that made this occur/*
> *Like the grafted devils they were*[84].

Public Enemy accuses the government of attempting to sabotage the establishing of a Black Power movement. This is typical of many of the lyrics concerning the American government. Rap music has always accused the government of being corrupt and using whatever means necessary to keep black people down. As Bakari

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[82] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/k/krsonelyrics/blackcoplyrics.html

[83] http://www.blackcommentator.com/165/165_radio_bc/01_05_06_radio_bc_black_on_black_crime.ht

Kitwana[85] points out, the hip hop generation's skepticism of the government is partly due to the fact that the Civil Rights Movement's cooperation with the government and political mainstream was not very successful. In Public Enemy's "What Kind of Power We Got?", Chuck D raps about his lack of trust in the government. He initially asks *Mr., Mr., why you always try to take out money?,* and then answers, *Because I am the government and you have to pay* . Later in the song he goes on to say, *Because we sick and fuckin tired/of being mistreated by the undefeated/Power to the seat that can't be beat*[86].

Many of the lyrics in the golden age of hip hop, when talking of injustice and discrimination, are talking on behalf of poor black people and minorities all over the world. This unity on the basis of class and race in hip hop music has not decreased, if anything it has gotten stronger. However, I would say today's social commentary in hip hop is more pro-black than anti-white, more anti-government and anti-corporations than anti-white. The more separatist attitude of early hip hop is slowly being supplemented by a more inclusive attitude with more focus on unity. (That is of course a general assessment, some rappers are still moving in the other direction.) KRS-One has been of one the rappers that always had focus on trying to create community, which is perhaps best displayed in his "The Movement":

> *This is a movement, all over the world we reach*
> *I can prove it, all over the world I teach*
> *You hear that Dr King "I Have a Dream" speech a lot*
> *but nowhere is it manifested but in Hip-Hop*[87]

While some rappers may subscribe more to a Malcolm X point of view, this song

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ml. Accessed 10.20.2006

[84] http://www.publicenemy.com/index.php?page=page5&item=9&num=55

[85] See *The Hip Hop Generation- Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, (New York: Basic Civitas Books), 2002.

[86] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/p/publicenemylyrics/whatkindapowerwegotlyrics.html

establishes the existence of a worldwide youth movement, in which hip hop plays a major role.

The following excerpt from Public Enemy's "Hitler's Day" displays a rhetoric rappers often use to make their point about the American government, to display the darker side of American history, in order to prove that this is an ongoing struggle with deep roots.

> *Remember the dead and it makes me curse*
> *When they don't include 100 million of us Black folks*
> *That died in the bottom of boats*
> *I can carry on bout the killing from dusk till dawn*
> *And war ain't the reason they gone*
> *Fourth of July a fuckin lie*
> *When did we ever get a piece of the pie*[88]

Historical events involving African Americans often occur in the lyrics of this era, most frequent is slavery and genocide. This is tied up with their distrust and resentment of the government and politics. Also the element of history is their contribution to the education of the young kids in their community, to teach them the history that they are not always being told in school.

> *For some reason we think we're free, so we'll never be/*
> *Because we haven't recognized slavery/*
> *You're still a slave, look at how you behave/*
> *Debatin on where and when and how and what Massa gave/*
> *You wanna know how we screwed up from the beginning?/*
> *We accepted our oppressors religion/*
> *So in the case of slavery it ain't hard/*
> *Because it's right in the eyes of THEIR God*[89].

On other occasions they go beyond the facts of history, into interpreting the

[87] http://www.lyricsdir.com/krs-one-the-movement-lyrics.html.
[88] http://www.publicenemy.com/index.php?page=page5&item=6&num=130
[89] http://www.lyricsdir.com/krs-one-higher-level-lyrics.html

meaning and impact of the historical facts, on black people. This particular lyric deals with African American behavioral patterns due to the legacy of slavery, and it works as a rude awakening to young people, as it tells them some of the root causes of the pathology that marks their communities. Bakari Kitwana defined the political agenda of the hip hop generation in terms of seven issues: education, employment, reparations, economic infrastructure in urban communities, youth poverty and disease, anti-youth legislation and foreign policy[90]. Many of these issues are common subjects to conscious rappers, like foreign policy, education and reparations for slavery and discrimination. This might indicate that the most socially engaged rappers are in tune with the leaders of the community and that they share the same view on how to improve the community.

Author Scott Boyd has observed that the language of rap music is politicized and used as a weapon to provoke people. He believes that the agenda of the hip hop generation is a continuation of that of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. In a previous excerpt, KRS-One claimed that Martin Luther King's message is echoed in hip hop. And a lot of rap music would be consistent with Dr King's agenda. However, I also believe there are parts of the hip hop culture and rap music that are far more likely to subscribe to the Black Power Movement's view of the world. Rap evokes a sense of having reached rock bottom, and being at the end of one's rope. The Black Power Movement was not only on the margins of society in general, but they did not feel that the Civil Rights Movement that they grew out of, was speaking on their behalf anymore, and that more uncompromising attitudes and actions were needed. The poor, urban Blacks that created the hip hop community, or hip hop movement, felt abandoned by the larger black community and its leaders. As

[90] Bakari Kitwana, 178-182.

with the Black Power Movement, rappers and the hip hop community felt that they needed a more confrontational language as well. Boyd expresses his viewpoint saying "[I] think what Black Power did and what hip hop would pick up on later, was move away from the sort of passive sense of suffering, 'We shall overcome'. Hip Hop is much more active, much more aggressive, much more militant."[91] This partly explains why hip hop developed the uncompromising attitudes we can find in most rap lyrics today. They basically express the thoughts and feelings of people on the margins of the American society. Boyd goes on saying that "[t]he music and the larger culture that surrounds it, hip hop, emerged from a uniquely African American disposition, and like the blues, jazz, and soul before it, give voice to those who tend to occupy the lowest rungs of the American social ladder."[92]

I think that in the core of much hip hop music lies the same as in the blues, the desire and need to create a consciousness and identity for themselves. In the era of hip hop, young black males are constantly being stereotyped in American culture, in public and on a personal level. Hip hop not only provided them with a forum in which they could fight back, within the hip hop culture this new generation of young disillusioned blacks were able to form an identity of their own and get their views and visions out to a audience and the world at large. Just as blues had allowed the black community to define their own culture, history and consciousness, hip hop did the same for a new generation of blacks. Although struggling with many of the same problems, racism and stigmatization, unemployment and poverty, it was a new world for the young people of the hip hop generation, and they needed something new to relate to, hip hop was the new thing.

[91] http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1178621. Accessed 10.20.2006
[92]http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1178621. Accessed 10.20.2006

GANGSTA RAP

This part of chapter two is about how the subgenre of gangsta rap takes the oppositional elements in hip hop to a more extreme level. Gangsta rap is also music of protest, however, in a very different way than conscious hip hop. In this chapter I also deal with the intersection of elements of whiteness and gangsta rap, in terms of the audience and buyers of this subgenre.

When hip hop exploded on the West Coast, it was a different kind of story than in New York and on the East Coast. Some see it as an acceleration of East Coast hip hop, while others see it as a subgenre or a different part of the hip hop culture. The explosion of gangsta rap happened at the same time as what I have referred to as the Golden Age of rap, but it distinguishes itself in several ways. Gangsta rap is one of the most important cultural expressions in the last few decades. It is different than the sociological and political rap of the Golden Era. It would seem to be an over-simplification to say that East Coast rap is conscious, political rap, and West Coast rap is apolitical, violent gangsta rap. Still, some generalizations can still be made. Gangsta rap can be found on the East Coast as well as on the West Coast; however, most of the artists being dubbed gangsta rappers belong on the West Coast. Nelson George makes it clear that gangsta rap is a stereotypical genre created by the mass media, and he thinks that the music is really too diverse to fit into that stereotype. As I discuss gangsta rap in this subchapter, I will be referring to rap emerging on the West Coast in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with artists like Ice-T, Ice Cube and N.W.A.. Gangsta rap, also sometimes referred to as “reality rap”, exploded onto the music scene in the latter part of the 1980s, only a few years after rap gained popularity on the East Coast. The sound, as well as content, was a lot more raw and gritty than that

of the East Coast. According to Steven Best and Douglas Kellner[93], gangsta rap accelerated the influence and controversy of the hip hop genre in the eyes of the public, due to its content and sound.

The emergence of the genre is directly connected to the crack-explosion, claims Nelson George. With the emergence of gangsta rap, the socio-political and economic factors contributing to the birth of hip hop, discussed in an earlier chapter, were almost grotesquely glorified. Jail became not a cruel punishment, but a rite of passage for many that helped define one's entry into adulthood.[94] This sub-genre also portrayed a lifestyle in the inner-city neighborhoods, only in more raw, gritty and violent terms. The violent and raw lyrics of gangsta rap can perhaps partly be explained by the fact that the controversy surrounding the lyrics might be the only way they felt they were being heard. However, the conscious rap of the East Coast was not indulging in these kinds of scenarios, and it still received a lot of attention and popularity. Gangsta rappers did not always seem to be committed to the idea of making their community a better one, but instead they dedicated themselves to the ideas and lifestyle of a thug or a gangsta, and celebrated this image. The glorification of this lifestyle can perhaps be seen as a result of being in a situation that seems so hopeless, that to embrace it and glorify it is the only option, almost like a survival mechanism. The thug life style that they are boasting about is their chance to gain respect and acknowledgement, so in order to succeed they will adjust, or even recreate, themselves in this image. The lyrics may often present surreal and dreamlike scenarios, with the rapper as the protagonist. Some lyrics are surreal to the point of making the actions similar to a cartoon or comic books. Rappers like Snoop Doggy Dog and Eminem have created alter-ego cartoon-like characters. Eminem's creation

[93] http://enculturation.gmu.edu/2_2/best-kellner.html. Accessed 10.25.2006

of the alter-ego Slim Shady allows him to go beyond the limits of realism, and take his lyrics and music to a whole other level in terms of violent scenarios. Most rappers do not bother to create an alter-ego, however. They seem more committed to the idea of being credited as the biggest and most controversial rapper in the game, and that can only happen if they portray themselves in their lyrics. This is all a general assessment of gangsta rap; however, there are more specific characteristics of the genre that sets it apart from other kinds of rap music, celebration and glorification of violence is but one of them.

Narcissism is a common characteristic of gangsta rap as there is an egocentric celebrating of the self in many of the lyrics. Many of the rappers see themselves as larger than life, in their lyrics. This might also be explained as a mechanism of survival, and the only way to make it in the ghetto. Many of the lyrics display an every-man-for-himself attitude. As reflected in Ice Cube's title song of his album *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*, if you are not on top, you are nothing at all. And the only one who can get you on top is you.

> *Back in the day I dip my shirt in dirt*
> *Sometimes I got away clean, sometimes people got hurt/*
> *But if you know me you know that I'm liable to bust a cap*
> *cos it's all about the survival of the fittest*[95]

These seems to be revealing thoughts behind the narcissism and egocentrism, a fear of not being on top of your game, as that seems to be the only way to survive.

A closer look at gangsta rap lyrics shows that the acceptance and even glorification of violence only applies to the rapper and his actions. If violence is used against him, it is not only condemned, but it also requires retaliation, which of course means more violence. As Best and Kellner express the relationship between gangsta rap and

[94] Nelson George, 44.

violence, “they celebrate it, internalize it, and embrace it as an ethos and means of self expression.” The narcissistic expression seems to be the anti-thesis of conscious rap, which often focuses on the community at large, whether it is just a description of life in the ghetto, or a call for change.

One of the things that identifies and distinguishes gangsta rap from other types of rap, is the strong elements of nihilism. There is a rejection of an overarching morality and values. This might partly be explained by the frequent portrayal in American culture of African Americans as animalistic. In this image of the animal, they respond to no higher authority or value system, and are guided only by their natural instincts. They are portrayed as intellectually inferior, aggressive and hedonistic. Writer Kheven LaGrone argues that gangsta rappers’ self-projected image as gangsters and thugs play well into the traditional portrayal of the African as a savage, as they seem to abide by no rules or conventions, or even values or morality[96]. Their lyrics can, as mentioned, display a rhetoric similar to that of social Darwinism, where the strongest survive, without any guiding principles in terms of authority or morality.

As already mentioned, gangsta rappers display an almost grotesque glorification of their own lifestyle. However, alongside these cartoon-like scenarios of killing and violence, there is also another voice of sadness emerging. Nihilism is also apparent here in the sense that loss of purpose and a feeling of meaninglessness are also present in many of the lyrics. Disillusion is a general characteristic of rap, and in gangsta rap it is very visible. Tupac is one of the artists whose lyrics are often filled with sadness over his situation and life. As he reflects on his life, he seems to be very conscious of the situation he is in, and the life he is leading. This can also be seen as

[95] http://www.icecube.org/am03.php.
[96] http://to-the-quick.binghampton.edu/issue%201/minstrels.html. Accessed 10.31.2006

the antithesis of the political rap of the East Coast rappers, which attempted to get people engaged and concerned about their own situation. However, it is similar to the more sociological rap of the East Coast, which is more about depicting the grim circumstances in which they live. The desperation echoed in sociological and political rap is fuelled with fear and paranoia in gangsta rap. Paranoia is also often directed against the government and its supposed attempt to undermine black people and keep them down. On other occasions it is directed towards their situation and their peers. In Tupac's "Only God Can Judge Me", the paranoia and sadness are very visible elements:

> *Got a body full of bullet holes lying here naked/*
> *Still I, can't breathe, somethings evil in my IV/*
> *Cause every time I breathe, I think they killin me/*
> *I'm having nightmares, homicidal fantasies/*
> *I wake up strangling, dangling my bed sheets/*
> *I call the nurse cause it hurts to reminisce/*
> *How did it come to this? I wish they didn't miss/*
> *Somebody help me, tell me where to go from here*
> *Cause even thugs cry, but do the Lord care?*[97]

Gangsta rap is controversial; it has received criticism from the most obvious opponents to more surprising ones. It has also been criticized for different reasons. The media have never been vocal supporters of the hip hop community, but with gangsta rap the tensions rose to a whole new level. The infamous killings of gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur and the East Coast-based Notorious B.I.G., along with Dr.Dre's assault charges and the alleged violent rivalry between Eazy A's Ruthless Records and Suge Knight's Death Row Records, all spurred the media's attack on gangsta rap. As the criticism of gangsta rap accelerated, it was evident that the violent scenarios in the music were so much more than shocking fantasies. To the rappers and other

[97] http://www.tupac-online.com/lyrics/1-77-00.html

people living in the inner-city neighborhoods, the violence and aggression they rapped about or listened to were never just music, and it was nothing new. It became a chicken-or-egg debate, on whether the music was fueling violence or simply just reflecting an already existing situation. I think it requires only a minimal knowledge of history and sociology to see that the living conditions of African-Americans in the ghettoes will foster violence, also in its cultural expression. This became unmistakably evident during the Los Angeles riots in 1992, as racial tensions surfaced. According to Nelson George, this riot had been happening all along, only on cd. Ice-Cube's "Black Korea" from the album *Death Certificate*, released only a few months before the riots, predicted what would happen if the racial tensions between African Americans and Asian Americans would intensify.

> *So pay respect to the Black fist/*
> *or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp/*
> *And then we'll see ya!*
> *Cause you can't turn the ghetto-into Black Korea.*[98]

When the riots broke out, Korean businesses became a target, just as Ice-Cube had anticipated. The LA riots were more that anything about racial profiling and the LAPD, which was blatantly demonstrated by the beatings of Rodney King and the subsequent verdict. N.W.A.'s infamous "Fuck Da Police" is the prime example of the hatred young African blacks felt towards the police, a pervasive theme in much gangsta rap:

> *Fuck the police commin' straight from the underground/*
> *A young nigger got it bad 'cause I'm brown/*
> *And not the other color/Some police think/*
> *they have the authority to kill a minority.*[99]

It is evident in many other songs that the gangsta rappers on the West Coast saw these

riots coming. They might not have predicted exactly how everything would play out, but many of them saw that the African-American communities in the inner-city ghettoes had had enough, and that it was only a matter of time before the situation would explode. The situation that occurred in Los Angeles in the early 1990s was almost repeated in Paris in November 2005. The riots took place in the poorest suburbs of Paris, which are mainly inhabited by immigrants, and they are the equivalent of American inner-city districts. The poorer Parisian suburbs had been in opposition for a while, due to high unemployment rates and few opportunities, this all exploded with the death of teenagers allegedly chased by the police. The hopeless situation in the suburbs had been described for some time in French rap lyrics. This situation is very reminiscent of what happened in Los Angeles, and both of these incidents sparked debates on discrimination and racial politics. The Los Angles riots were a testimony to the cultural meaning and importance the subversive elements of rap music could have.

The phenomenon of gangsta rap is in some ways cross-cultural, which is not without complications. As gangsta rap's popularity grew to great heights, it became clear that the larger portion of their audience (meaning those who bought the records) were young white males from the suburbs. The young white suburban boy listening to gangsta rap seems to be a reincarnation of the hipster in Norman Mailer's essay on the White Negro. The rebelliousness of black culture, and especially music, has always attracted white kids. According to Kellner and Best[100], white kids were seeking the vitality, spirituality and coolness of black culture, as opposed to the conformity and complacency of white suburbia. Gangsta rappers blatantly reject the white middle-class norms and laws that the young white kids are rebelling against, so they find a

[98] http://www.icecube.org/death15.php
[99] http://www.lyricsondemand.com/n/nwalyrics/fuckthepolicelyrics.html

natural affinity in the lyrics of gangsta rap. Another white element in gangsta rap is the corporate world that rappers, like everyone else, are dependent on. It is commonly agreed that hip hop music would not be where it is today without white entrepreneurs in the music business, from white record labels to A&R people to managers, etc. Black entrepreneurship has developed alongside the business and music itself, but the situation is not yet at the point where African Americans are in control of the hip hop industry. The traditional combination of a white audience and an industry largely controlled by white men, has led to a different point of criticism in gangsta rap.

Gangsta rap has been criticized for evoking the racist archetypes of the blackface minstrel shows. Writer and activist Kheven Lee LaGrone deems gangsta rappers "the 90s minstrels", saying that these rappers continue a long tradition of exposing and reproducing racial stereotypes and providing entertainment for white suburbia. He parallels the two traditions on several points; most importantly he observes that the primary market for both the minstrel tradition and gangsta rap is white America. The more vile and vilified the rappers were packaged, the more intrigued and curious the "rebellious" white people became. One of the many problems this creates is that the image projected by these rappers becomes a personification of young black males to a white America that sees this image as representative, because it is their primary exposure to black America, the same effect that the minstrel shows had in their heyday. LaGrone argues that the similarity is taken further with the black man being transformed into a commodity and marketed to the masses, so it all comes down to capitalist principles, not music, art or social commentary.

Despite the "interaction" with the white community, there is also the

[100] http: //enculturation.gmu.edu/2_2/best-kellner.html. Accessed 10.25.2006

reassuring fact for white America that blacks are contained in their ghetto communities. This distance is necessary in order for white America to see the rappers as pure entertainment and not critically examine the content of their lyrics, claims LaGrone. It also ensures a sociological, economic and cultural distance between these communities. I think LaGrone's point with the article is that with their enthusiasm for gangsta rap, white America continues a tradition of defining and identifying themselves in terms of their distance and dissimilarity from black America and therefore feels the need to create an image of black people as intellectually, emotionally and culturally inferior. Politician and Civil Rights activist C. Delores Tucker was perhaps the most renowned opponent of gangsta rap and also a supporter of the blackface theory, expressing herself I rather extreme terms. She compared gangsta rap to genocide, saying that white corporations are intentionally using it as a vehicle to undermine black people, by again reducing them to savages[101]. Nelson George recalls an encounter with her at a meeting of a congressional subcommittee on Commerce, Competitiveness and Consumer Protection, in 1994. According to him, she was not only misinformed on the subject, in referring to rap groups that were signed and distributed by black entrepreneurs, she assumed these very same entrepreneurs would not make it without white corporations. This is a potential problem with the minstrel theory, that there are a great, and increasing, number of black entrepreneurs in the gangsta rap industry. Black entrepreneurship will again lead to further complications, as blacks are not only selling self-hatred as entertainment, but also marketing and distributing it. Still, it is white corporations that are mostly in charge of the record industry, so I guess it all depends on how far one is willing to go into conspiracy theories.

[101] Nelson George, 189.

Best and Kellner are throughout their essay making a distinction between gangsta rappers and the more politically conscious rappers. They believe some rappers, like KRS-One and Public Enemy, want to be positive role models to young kids and educate the community. Some of these rappers are not only committed to this through their music, like KRS-One who also organized the famous Stop the Violence campaign, donating all the proceeds to the National Urban League. These rappers are making an effort for the community, rather then themselves. It is a different story with gangsta rap, they put themselves and their winnings in focus. Gangsta rappers might cover a lot of the same topics as political rappers, such as police brutality and discrimination, only their stories are more extreme. When describing their daily life, they do not profess to have a solution to the problems they rap about, it is not a politically conscious protest. And that makes a lot of difference, I believe. The apolitical lyrics are not so much a protest or an attempt to make things better as it is an expression and celebration of the circumstances conscious rap is trying to defeat. It is hard to say why this has become, in my opinion, two different directions in hip hop. The sociological and cultural conditions are the same for the most part, so it is hard to say what made one type of rap more violent, misogynist and raw than the other.

I think it also needs to be mentioned that there are exceptions to this rule, since some rappers dubbed as gangsta rappers are committed to making their community a better one. There is a musical network worth mentioning called Guerilla Funk Recordings, with contributors like Public Enemy as well as militant gangsta rappers like Kam and Paris, committed to counter the meaninglessness of much of the rap out there. A link on their website[102] suggests reading material from Bobby Seale to Nelson Mandela and Noam Chomsky. Sadly, these kinds of efforts rarely make it to

[102] http://www.guerrillafunk.com/index.html

the mainstream. In this case it is probably not even representative of the genre of gangsta rap. Still, even gangsta rap in general has some cultural value, I believe. In all its nihilism, narcissism, violence and misogyny, there is a reflection of inner-city life many poor black young men are forced to live, and the stigmatization they face (which they of course reinforce themselves in these lyrics). I believe that the nature of their lyrics and the portrayal of their lives are not merely a profitable way of packaging and selling the artists to young white America. The picture gangsta rap paints is supported by other pop cultural achievements, most notably films such as John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* and the Hughes brothers'*Menace to Society*. Both films were released in the early 1990s, 1991 and 1993 respectively, and coupled with gangsta rap, they contributed to the emergence of the thug lifestyle in popular media. Even if the music and the films have received a lot of criticism for glorifying this lifestyle and typecasting black men (the criticism comes from middle class intellectual blacks, as well as whites), I would still claim that as long as it is a representative image of a marginalized group of people, it still has an important cultural meaning and should be recognized as a valuable diagnosis of American realities. The harshest critics seem to forget that American culture has been obsessed with violence and gangster fairytales in popular culture long before gangsta rap emerged. Seeing the music for what it is, does not necessarily mean endorsing its message, in my opinion it simply means to acknowledge that gangsta rap has emerged for a reason, and that it is important to recognize the root causes for the manifestation of this music in the first place.

HIP HOP-- A CULTURAL AGENT FOR THE FUTURE?

Primarily, hip hop emerged as the voice of a group that previously had no channels of

expression, and much to express. Rap became a tool of communication to the rest of the world. Secondarily, the creation of rap music and hip hop culture was also a creation of an identity for young urban blacks, which went beyond the stereotype of being poor and black. Rap music and hip hop culture were one of the few ways through which poor young black men had an opportunity to empower themselves. It offered them a culture of their own that was acknowledged by their peers and later by mainstream society as well, and so being a part of the hip hop culture offered them a sense of self-worth they could not attain elsewhere. Thirdly, it is important to recognize that hip hop is not merely music, as I have previously mentioned, it is a generation and a culture. As rap music developed, as it became a source of knowledge to young kids in the community. The hip hop generation became educated through the music, and it became gradually more organized and kids became more engaged in their own situation and aware of the possibilities of change.

The still growing popularity of hip hop raises important questions of the role of hip hop in the future. Today hip hop has reached a massive popularity, and this subculture is one of the biggest influences on young kids in America and getting more influential in other parts of the world as well. Alongside this development, I would claim there has also been a development in the cultural importance of the music itself, in a negative sense. The old politically conscious hip hop of the old days, preaching awareness and knowledge, has more or less become a sub-genre today. Alternative hip hop, with artists like Talib Kweli, Mos Def, Dead Prez amongst others, represent a fairly small minority of the industry, and although they might not be considered underground artists, they are not selling even close to that of the more commercial artists like 50 Cent or Nelly. Hip hop today seems further and further removed from the message the rappers of the early days tried to convey, it seems to be heading in a

different direction, with some exceptions, of course. The lyrics of today's mainstream hip hop seem to be centered on guns, money and women. It has become a bragging contest over who has been shot the most times, who is the wealthiest, who is the best rapper, who is the biggest hustler, etc. In the old days, there were a few well-known clashes and quarrels between certain rappers, what the hip hop jargon refers to as a "beef". These days it is hard to keep up with who has a beef with whom, there seems to be very little unity left in the hip hop community. To the public, the conflict and murders of Tupac and Notorious B.I.G. emphasized the violent nature of hip hop. And for a long time that conflict, along with the beef between famous New York rappers Jay-Z and Nas, was what you heard when it came to conflicts in the hip hop community (at least when it came to the more famous rappers). These days, however, there does not seem to be a rapper in the Billboard charts that does not have a beef with some other famous rapper. One look on the Billboard Hot 100 chart on Oct 2nd 2006 finds Ludacris and Chingy in the top ten. Ludacris has been involved in rivalries with fellow Atlanta rapper T.I., and Chingy had a beef with Nelly, both of them also from Atlanta.

Rappers today do not appear to have the community's best interest at heart, if one makes generalizations. The call for unity and collective strength has been replaced by an every-man-for-himself mentality. Rap music has created an alternative lifestyle to aspire to for young blacks. In the beginning this lifestyle meant equality, respect and a voice. It meant proper housing, an education and opportunities. This world, desired by the earliest rappers like Chuck D and KRS-One, has been replaced by a world of expensive cars, not so expensive women, diamonds, and so on. Again, I want to emphasize that this is not the case for all contemporary rap music; you can still hear tales of discrimination, racial profiling and the hardships of ghetto life, but

unfortunately raps about "Bentleys, bitches and bling" seem to heavily outnumber them on the contemporary scene. In an essay by Bakari Kitwana in the *Village Voice*, Brother Ali, rapper and part owner of record label Rhymesavers Entertainment, explains this development in hip hop with the decreasing emphasis on the culture of hip hop, "It's just an industry now and it's sold back to us-it's not ours anymore. It used to be anti-establishment, off the radar, counterculture. People in the streets are now being told what hip hop is and what it looks like by tv".[103] Kitwana, in the same essay, observes that the early days of hip hop, where conscious rap coexisted with the more entertainment-oriented rap, is over, and that today there is a clear distinction between political rap and "party-rap".

So as the content and politics of rap music keep changing, what is the role of the hip hop generation and community in the years to come? Can the music still be an agent of change and awareness in the black community? Can it still provide minority kids with the tools of self-assertion? In spite of the negative trends in contemporary rap music, there are positive developments in the community at large. There are still powerful forces in the hip hop community that are dedicated to organizing the community and creating a debate. Social justice activist Jay Woodson believes hip hop activism makes a large contribution and constitutes an important part of today's Black Liberation Movement[104]. The hip hop community has two important political organizations in this context, he claims, the National Hip Hop Political Convention and the Hip Hop Caucus. The development and popularity of these organizations, along with the increasing study and analysis of hip hop, contributes to the agenda of social justice activism. However, he believes that in order for the hip hop community to be significant in a social justice movement, it needs to "accomplish an internal

[103] http://www.villagevoice.com/music/0526,kitwana,65332,22.html. Accessed 10.20.2006.
[104] http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=10365. Accessed 10.20.2006.

political goal", by which he means to deal with the problems of misogyny, materialism and violence. The Hip Hop Caucus is an organization dedicated to the unification of pop culture, social and political activism and community activism. The Hip Hop Caucus consists of several organizations, all dedicated to a common goal of strengthening and empowering the black community. Among these organizations is the National Hip Hop Political Convention, the Rock the Vote initiative and Sean Combs' Citizen Change that created the Vote or Die campaign in the 2004 Presidential Election. The National Hip Hop Political Convention is an organization dedicated to social justice activism, citing their political agenda as: economic justice, education, criminal justice, health and human rights. The convention itself is a bi-annual event and in 2006 featured political debates, a film festival, workshops, and concerts by political hip hop artists like Dead Prez and Boots Riley from hip hop group The Coup. The diversity of the political debates proves how broad the activism of the hip hop generation has become. The topics of the debates featured everything from the FCC to women's political leadership to the criminal justice system, and so on. Hip hop activist and spokesperson for NHHPC, Malik Cooper, believes that hip hop politics today is still reminiscent of the Black Power Movement, and that in spite of mainstream hip hop's focus on other things, there is still social and political activism in hip hop[105]. The NHHPC is only one of many different organizations, contributors and activist groups trying to make a difference today. What has changed is that the artists committed to the idea of rap music as a political tool are less visible. Many of them are underground artists, others like Black Star, Dead Prez and The Coup are selling records, but not in the same numbers as big mainstream artists. And several of these artists have stated that they feel forced to choose between selling

[105] http://www.wiretapmag.org/stories/40441. Accessed 10.20.2006

records and conveying a message. So one could say that the focus of mainstream hip hop has shifted, but certain parts of the hip hop culture are still committed to the ideals of social change and a better community.

There is also the question of the extent to which hip hop was ever political or conscious, and if it should even be political. Some people seem to think that social activism and representation of black youth are not the responsibility of rappers, and that the era of hip hop and social activism is dead, if it ever existed. A contributor to hip hop forum *hiphopmusic.com*, seems to believe that the focus on rappers as activists and agents of change is a big lie, and that the primary goal of hip hop should be to entertain the audience[106]. It is important to acknowledge that the rappers, who were/are politically conscious, are not trying to be real politicians. They are merely trying to be a voice of their community, and speak the language of their peers. KRS-One will never be Jesse Jackson, nor is he trying to be. Today's rap music is still music enjoyed by many people. Hip hop has a great musical value in that it is a highly innovative genre. The entertainment value of rap music is, as most fans are aware, still great. However, I fail to see how one needs to exclude the other. The use of rap music in political and social activism is not necessarily synonymous with the whole genre being dedicated to politics. I agree that one should be careful not to give all contemporary rappers the responsibility of being politically conscious and educational. But that makes it all the more important to recognize the legacy of early rap, not to mention the reason it was created in the first place. On the induction of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, rapper Melle Mel urged the music industry to 'to make hip hop the culture that it was, instead of the culture of violence it is right now.'[107] This might signify that some of

[106] http://www.hiphopmusic.com/archives/000673.html.
[107] http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/13/arts/music/13hall.html?_r=1&oref=slogin. Accessed

the rappers from the early days of hip hop believe that hip hop was more important at the earlier stages, and that the latest developments are not to be desired.

The content of early rap, as I have discussed previously, is in many cases a social commentary. To see this as just music is not just decreasing its cultural value, but it also fails to recognize the significance of rap as an element of hip hop culture. It should be unnecessary to point out that from the beginning, hip hop was not just music, it was a culture of its own, where rap is only considered one of the elements. As a culture representing a generation, there is a lot to be said. It is expressed not only in rap music lyrics, but in the pure musicology of the genre, as well as in graffiti and breaking. All elements of hip hop contain elements of protest against the establishment (of politics, of art, of dancing etc) and are an expression by people who have no other channels to express themselves. Rap music is inevitably the music of protest, because it is the music of a generation consisting of a marginalized minority. Such protest does not necessarily equate with a revolutionary goal, but with much of hip hop and rap it does. Rap music has become one of the most important genres of modern popular music, and as such it serves a multitude of functions, as it always did.

03.13.2007.

CONCLUSION

I initially stated that this thesis was not primarily meant to be a comparison between blues and hip hop, and I have therefore focused on the two genres separately. However, some similarities and differences are also relevant to my thesis and validate that there has been a continuation of opposition and dissent in these musical forms. So I will try to show in this conclusion how the two genres parallel and how the music has developed, thus creating a continuation and tradition of social commentary, as well as an identity for African Americans.

Neither blues nor hip hop would have been born without the grim conditions in which they were created. The blues was to a great extent the result and expression of the harsh conditions and treatment African Americans lived under during and after slavery. The birth of hip hop can be attributed to a different set of deplorable conditions, where the lack of civil control in the northern urban ghettos is a very significant factor. Drugs and gangs rule the boroughs and police corruption and violence are widespread. Contemporary black music in general is a protest because of these circumstances. As I started interpreting lyrics and writing about them, it became obvious that the two genres of African American music, blues and hip hop, must be defined not only by race, but also by class. As argued, it is difficult to see race separately from class in America. The public and the psychological wages of whiteness are always present, reflecting the deprivation and inferiority of blacks, in all spheres of life. The inferiority is reflected in the blues in the frequent use of animalistic references, a legacy from slavery, though these metaphors could also be seen as an expression of strength or potency. In hip hop there is also a tradition of using animalistic references, i.e. rappers frequently refer to themselves as dogs. Tricia

Rose equals rappers with ideological, uncontrollable stray dogs. In a culture where rap expresses the gap between urban ghetto life and the dominant black culture movement fighting for racial equality, the stray dog imagery represents the voices of dissent and the legitimacy of urban reality, and there are ideological dogcatchers out to catch and silence these stray dogs.[108] In that sense the notion of animalistic references and metaphors has developed with the music, and in the era of hip hop the dog metaphor might be an indicator of this development in that the musicians are now activists and out there to try to alarm and educate people.

Mary Ellison observes that black people's fight for equality in democratic societies has brought forth some political and social concessions, but rarely economic ones.[109] Both blues and hip hop are very much an expression of poverty, and the disillusion brought on by poverty. It means not only being deprived of the opportunity to make a living, but being deprived of the opportunity for self-realization and fulfillment, as well as the chance to make a contribution. They were and are still outsiders in their own land.

All these elements of race, class and poverty are intertwined and constitute a truthful expression of black life in America. African American music will always contain an element of dissent and protest, because the music is so closely linked with the performers' and audiences' own real-life experience. I believe black music follows a line of succession more consistent than white music in American culture. White music in America has branched out into a multitude of genres and subcultures, a more or less natural reflection of the demographics, of course. Most genres of African American music, on the other hand, are closely related to each other, perhaps much due to the fact that they are all the expression of a minority. The close

[108] Tricia Rose, 102.
[109] Mary Ellison, 17.

relationship between real-life experiences and African American music is a result of the marginalization of black people in America. And music has been their primary source of expressing their discontent. During the era that blues emerged, music was the only place they could express themselves somewhat freely, but fast-forward to the era of hip hop, and music is still the primary outlet for young blacks. Hip hop was dubbed “the CNN of black people”, and for many rap and hip hop were the best education. Hip hop was honest and made the people usually viewed as the outcasts into the main subject of their own world. Instead of being burdened with the stigma of being “the others”, rap offered them the perspective of “us”.

In addition to functioning as a forum of viewpoints and emotions, blues and hip hop have been important in creating and establishing a consciousness for black people. Being a people officially forced into silence, they were never able to form an awareness of themselves as a people, and the blues provided that. For the performers and listeners of blues, the creation of an identity separate from the white community might have brought them a feeling of being one step closer to spiritual freedom. When hip hop emerged, urban young black kids were disillusioned and far removed from the black middle class and the official voices of the black community. Rap music (accompanied by graffiti and breaking) allowed them to create an identity of their own, expressing what their generation was experiencing, how they felt and what they thought needed to be done. The identity and consciousness created and offered by the music was important because it included the audience, the community, and that is what gives the music significance beyond the purely musical aspect. This identity naturally became one of dissent and controversy within the blues, because it was an expression of race in America, and at that point in time that was oppositional. Opposition to the white community, in every format, would necessarily be

controversial because it deviated from the norm and represented “otherness”. The voice and identity of the hip hop generation, about one hundred years later, were still controversial for many of the same reasons. This voice still conveyed the lives of “others” in America, only now it was not restricted to the black community anymore. Hip hop arrived at a time when technological advances were made very rapidly. This made it possible for hip hop to spread their message around America and around the world efficiently, allowing hip hop to create a cultural connection and solidarity beyond American borders. Other elements of the hip hop culture, like breaking and graffiti, solidified this connection and emphasized the significance of the hip hop culture. The hip hop culture became international and took on different shapes and meanings all over the world. But no matter where or in what language, hip hop remained the music of opposition and dissent, as it was originally created.

Another observation that has remained somewhat obvious throughout this thesis, is that the hip hop generation is still struggling with many of the same problems as the singers and listeners of blues did. At the time the blues emerged, slavery was fresh in people’s mind and racism was a part of life for blacks. After two world wars, the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, blacks in America had made their contribution to the nation, but things did not look all that different for them even so. The legacy of slavery was still present in many urban African American communities at the time that hip hop emerged. Poverty, disillusion, misogyny, prejudice, the feeling of inferiority and emasculation, these can all be seen to have their roots in slavery. If you add urban isolation in the 1980s, there seems to be a complete pathological pattern, and hip hop reflects and in many ways validates this pathology. Apart from what one can read directly into rap lyrics, the subtext of the music is also valuable in that it discloses social patterns in poor urban African

American communities. And by reading hip hop, it becomes obvious that African Americans still struggle with the same problems now as they always did, and many of those problems can be traced back to slavery.

As mentioned in my Introduction, there is not a lot of literature that explores the continuation and tradition of protest in African American music; most of the literature I was able to find was restricted to genres, and the element of protest was often incorporated into other topics. As I have described in my thesis, both genres provide the community with an identity and an understanding of their own experience, although this statement is debatable for some scholars. The concept of black essentialism and its meaning to the music might have been an interesting topic for further study. Furthermore, I think it would have been interesting to explore the connection between African American music and poetry. The blues was an important source of inspiration to poets like Langston Hughes, as well as writers like Zora Neale Hurston; the link between jazz and poetry needs no further explanation, and with the emergence of rap, many would claim that the music and the poetry have become one. Topics like these are essentially exploring the deeper meaning and importance of African American music to black people.

The protest in African American music developed from being an expression of rural disillusion in the blues, to becoming a voice of urban alienation with the culmination of hip hop. At this point in time, protest and political music is more or less confined to the underground hip hop scene, and mainstream hip hop is not overly concerned with making a social commentary. Therefore, the future of African American music as a tool of communication and critical expression is uncertain. I think it will be difficult for hip hop to get back to that place where protest and dissent were the result of the raw and unrestrained expression of young blacks. However, it

seems that not all hope is lost, as many of the creative forces behind the early days, as well as young people of today, are still committed to helping the hip hop generation reach its goals. Young blacks' activism and commitment can be a powerful device in overcoming the stereotypes they are constantly fighting. The politics and activism of youth movements today are in bloom and encouraging. Professor Craig Werner at the University of Wisconsin observes that today's young activists are more unified than ever before[110]. As the hip hop culture is more diverse now, interracial coalitions are possible as they are uniting over common goals. One can only hope the music will follow the, and restore some of the political and social activism appeal of its early days.

[110] See http://www.thenation.com/doc/20000515/temple. Accessed 04.11.2207

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